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# Storytelling and Transitional Justice in Latin America: The Roles of Truth Commissions and the Arts in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala

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**STORYTELLING AND TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE IN LATIN AMERICA:**

**The Roles of Truth Commissions and the Arts**

**in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala**

**A senior thesis presented**

**By**

**Anna Seidner**

**to**

**the Human Rights Program**

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

*“We often cannot get out of the terrible shadow of our historical journey because we have never come to terms with it, have never faced its stories...”* – Harold Scheub<sup>1</sup>

*“...perhaps we should think of the past as seeds, rather than as corpses –not dead and forgotten but something from which a future can grow”* – Teresa Godwin Phelps<sup>2</sup>

Mass-scale repression, torture, human slaughter. How do nations and individuals even begin to cope with such traumas? This essay suggests that storytelling is an essential element of this difficult process, looking to the examples of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala to demonstrate how collectively and individually “remembering and telling the truth about” *unspeakable* atrocities has played a central role in both official and personal efforts to reckon with the legacies of brutal dictatorships and to move forward towards democracy and healing (Hayner 135). What is storytelling? In what ways can it contribute to a nation’s transition from violent authoritarian rule to a more democratic society? And to individuals’ needs as they cope with traumas suffered at the hands of their own government? What forms can this storytelling take? To what extent can truth commissions be considered an officially orchestrated mode of storytelling? What alternative, grassroots means of storytelling have emerged in addition to the venues provided by the state? Why? How have the arts provided individuals with the means to tell their personal stories and the story of their country? What specific examples of this do we see in Latin America? These are the questions I aim to answer through this essay –not only to arrive at a more complete understanding of the histories and moments of transition of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, but also to contribute to a larger body of knowledge that can inform the future efforts

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<sup>1</sup> *The Art of Truth-telling about Authoritarian Rule* (13)

<sup>2</sup> *Shattered Voices* (128)

of other nations that are attempting to reckon with similar periods of abuse. This introductory chapter will provide the background information –about the field of *transitional justice* and the history of the three Latin American focal countries –needed to engage in this analysis.

### **Understanding ‘Transitional Justice’**

When a repressive regime falls from power, it leaves behind a complicated and problematic legacy that needs to be addressed as the country and its individual victims attempt to move forward. Expecting to shift immediately from abusive authoritarian rule to a new democracy is not realistic; rather a period of transition ought to be expected and carefully facilitated in these situations. During these crucial moments of changeover, it has become expected that the new government will undertake a project of transitional justice. The International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), a global non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to this field, provides a general definition of the term:

Transitional justice is a response to systematic or widespread violations of human rights. It seeks recognition of victims and promotion of possibilities for peace, reconciliation and democracy. Transitional justice is not a special form of justice but justice adapted to societies transforming themselves after a period of pervasive human rights abuse. In some cases, these transformations happen suddenly; in others, they may take place over decades. (“What is Transitional Justice?”)

The traditional mechanisms of transitional justice are criminal prosecutions, truth commissions, reparations programs, security system reform, and memorialization efforts; however “many societies have developed other creative approaches to past abuse” (“What is Transitional Justice?”). It is important to note that, “experience suggests that to be effective transitional justice should include several measures that complement one another. For no single measure is



as effective on its own as when combined with the others” (“What is Transitional Justice?”).

Thus, countries should take a “holistic approach,” incorporating several mechanisms in a way that best responds to the unique circumstances that they face (“What is Transitional Justice?”).

“Ultimately, there is no single formula for dealing with a past marked by large-scale human rights abuse... in the end, each society should –indeed must –choose its own path” (“What is Transitional Justice?”). Yet, while the means and areas of emphasis of each transitional justice project will and ought to differ, they can all be thought of as having the same fundamental goal. This aim is two-fold. On the larger, societal level, a period of transitional justice must work to “restor[e] social order;” while, at the same time, it is crucial to focus on the “healing of individual victims” (Hayner 135). As I have expressed, the purpose of this essay is to examine the transitional justice projects of Argentina, Chile and Guatemala, though not in their entirety; rather I am singling out one key process –storytelling –that is a component of these larger projects, searching for the mechanisms (in both the official and unofficial sense of the term) that best facilitated it. However, in order to understand how these countries put the abovementioned theoretical model of transitional justice into practice, it is important to have a sense of the history of the abuses to which each was responding.

### **Brief Historical Context**

#### ***Argentina – The Dirty War (1976-1983)***

On March 24, 1976 the armed forces overthrew the democratically elected Argentine government (led then by Isabel Martínez de Perón, the widow of Juan Domingo Perón), and proceeded to maintain control of the country through a series of successive military juntas over the next seven years (1976-1983) (Hayner 33). “Citing the need to protect Christian values from the communists and specter of Peronism, the military junta authorized the armed forces to begin

interrogations and arrests in the name of national security” (Muttersbaugh 4). They referred to this project of containing –or perhaps more accurately, eliminating –the “subversive” threat that challenged their power and ideologies as the National Reorganization Process, or *el Proceso*. This quickly escalated into a period known as the Dirty War (*la Guerra Sucia*), labeled as such due to the extreme violence brought upon the Argentine people by their own government. “The most notorious feature of repression by the military dictatorship was the practice of disappearances,” abductions of suspected subversives (Filippini 1). These individuals, known as *los desaparecidos* (the disappeared), “were sent to hundreds of secret detention centers, where they were interrogated under barbaric methods. Ultimately, the vast majority of the *desaparecidos* were systematically, but secretly, murdered” (Filippini 1). Their bodies were “disposed of as never to be found,” leaving “agonized family members” and loved ones to eternally question their fate (Hayner 33). It is estimated that more than 30,000 people were disappeared during the seven years of military rule.

Facing mounting national and international condemnation due to its failing economy and blatant disregard for human rights, the junta decided to launch a campaign to reclaim the Falkland Islands (*las Islas Malvinas*) from Great Britain in an effort to “curry public favor” (Del Sarto). The plan was a failure. Hundreds of Argentines died in the conflict and Britain retained control of the island territory. Due to “the resulting disgrace and public outrage suffered by the armed forces over their loss, ...the military acquiesced to popular elections and a return to civilian rule in 1983” (Hayner 33). It is important to note that, “before leaving power, in fear of being held accountable for its crimes, the military junta granted itself immunity from prosecution and issued a decree ordering the destruction of all documents relating to military repression” (Hayner 33). Thus, the influence of the regime endured into the period of transition and the

building of the new democratic Argentina. These policies of impunity, as well as the culture of silence and fear that had been cultivated through the violent repression, became enormous obstacles for newly-elected President Raúl Alfonsín as he attempted to restore social order and to promote healing for the individuals struggling to cope with the trauma they had witnessed and/or endured.

### ***Chile – The Pinochet Regime (1973-1990)***

Similarly to the history of state terror in Argentina, the repression in Chile began with a coup d'état. On September 11, 1973, the Chilean armed forces, under the command of General Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratic socialist government of Dr. Salvador Allende, “ending Chile’s long tradition of constitutional government” (“Chile: The Pinochet Years”). Between 1973 and 1990, “the regime completely controlled the country, mainly through violence and threats of violence” (Phelps 91). “Under Pinochet’s rule, political dissent was handled by police brutality, exile, extrajudicial executions, kidnapping, and torture (Phelps 91). As was the case in Argentina, those who were labeled as “ideological enem[ies]” of the regime, fitting the “profile” of the “subversive,” were the targets of this abuse (“Chile: The Pinochet Years”). An estimated 2,600 to 3,400 Chilean citizens were executed or disappeared, while another 30,000 to 100,000 were tortured (“Chile: The Pinochet Years”). As a result of this violence on such a massive scale, “Chilean society slowly began to sink into fear and silence” (Agosín 6).

In 1988, the regime allowed for a democratic election to take place, completely expecting that Pinochet would be reelected and continue to serve as president for the next eight years (Phelps 91). To their shock and dismay, “in October of 1988 the military government was voted out of power, and Patricio Aylwin was elected president” (Phelps 91). As the Argentine leaders

had done as they exited office, Pinochet was careful to maintain some power over the abilities of the new government to punish him and others for the crimes of the past. For example, in 1978, Pinochet created an amnesty law that “barred prosecution of almost all human rights crimes that had occurred since the coup” (1973-1978) (Hayner 35). Additionally, in 1980, he “amended the constitution... to ensure his continued power and to preserve the autonomy and political influence of the military; among these changes was the stipulation that he would remain commander in chief of the army until 1998, and would thereafter serve as senator for life” (Hayner 35). For obvious reasons, Pinochet was an adamant proponent of sweeping the past under the rug, so to speak. As he boldly stated in 1995, “It is best to remain silent and to forget. It is the only thing to do: we must forget. And forgetting does not occur by opening cases, putting people in jail” (“Chile: The Pinochet Years”). Thus, once again, these official policies instituted by the falling regime, as well as the climate of fearful silence that it cultivated through its abusive practices, shaped the context within which the new government and the people of Chile formulated their responses to the massive traumas of the past.

### ***Guatemala – Civil War (1960-1996)***

“The roots of the Guatemalan civil war reach back through nearly 500 years of violence and ethnic exclusion” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). For the purposes of this essay however, I will begin the overview of the country’s internal conflict with the coup d’état of June 1954, which overthrew the democratically elected civilian leader Jacobo Arbenz and initiated a right-wing military dictatorship (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). Throughout the 1960s, as the military regime employed violence to “liquidate their political opponents,” “the Left grew increasingly militarized and launched a full-scale civil war against the government” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). This fighting between “anticommunist government forces

and the leftist Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) lasted for over thirty years and resulted in some 200,000 deaths and disappearances,” the vast majority of which being of indigenous Maya individuals (Hayner 45). It is clear that, particularly during the reign of General Efraín Ríos Montt (1982-1983), the country’s indigenous populations were the direct targets of systemic violence and attempts at extermination, which has today been labeled as genocide. An example of a campaign of violence carried out against this marginalized group was the “scorched earth” operation of 1982. During this time, “the army and its paramilitary units – including 'civilian patrols' of forcibly conscripted local men – systematically attacked 626 villages. The inhabitants were raped, tortured and murdered” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). The massacres and physical abuse were just one piece of this form of violence. The military forces also “completely razed” “over three hundred villages” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). “Buildings were demolished; crops and drinking water were fouled” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”).

Even after “United Nations-moderated negotiations finally brought the war to an end” in 1996, an atmosphere inhospitable to acknowledging and responding to these massive-scale abuses pervaded the country. “Edgar Gutiérrez, a former foreign minister, has called post-conflict Guatemala a ‘kingdom of impunity’” (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Holocaust’”). Despite the “unequivocal evidence” that exists surrounding the crimes of the past, holding known perpetrators accountable proved difficult and even dangerous, as, “all too often, those who have attempted to unmask the perpetrators of atrocities have themselves become targets” of violence (“Guatemala: ‘Silent Genocide’”). Thus, continued violence was one of the greatest barriers Guatemala –the state and the individuals within it –faced in reckoning with its past.

## Conclusions

Engaging with this historical context makes clear how delicate and critical the projects of transitional justice of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala were. With this background in mind, the second chapter of this essay provides further explanation of the potential roles of storytelling processes within transitional justice efforts, including functions such as denouncing past abuses, correcting the historical record, and rebuilding community. There, I also identify truth commissions and the arts as two modes through which storytelling can and has historically taken place, examining their strengths and limitations as venues for the process. While truth commissions are an official and relatively well-established means of democratic transition, the arts represent an alternative and less conventional way of achieving many of these same benefits of storytelling. Thus, I devote the second half of this essay (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) to the examination of specific artistic works –Nora Stejilevich’s *testimonio*, *A Single, Numberless Death* in Argentina, the *arpillera* movement in Chile, and Daniel Hernández-Salazar’s photographic angels in Guatemala –that emerged in the aftermath of the political violence in Latin America. I use these examples to illustrate the legitimacy and the power of the arts as a mechanism of transitional justice due to their contributions to the essential process of storytelling.

**CHAPTER 2:  
THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING WITHIN NATIONAL TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE  
PROJECTS: A Consideration of Truth Commissions and the Arts**

*“In remembering, we re-member. We put back together that which was broken apart—ourselves, our families, our communities, our countries.” – Teresa Godwin Phelps<sup>3</sup>*

“The word ‘storytelling’ is often “used in many different ways” (“What is Storytelling?”). Thus, I want to be clear about my understanding of storytelling before launching into an in-depth analysis of the process and how it has been and can be used by societies and individuals during transitions away from a period repressive authoritarian rule and towards the establishment of a more democratic and peaceful society. The National Storytelling Network, a community of storytelling “practitioners” from the United States and Canada, defines the term in the following way: “storytelling is the interactive art of using words and actions to reveal the elements and images of a story while encouraging the listener’s imagination” (“What is Storytelling?”). I find this explanation to be an excellent starting point, needing just a few changes and slight additions to work for the purposes of this essay. I too conceive of storytelling as an art that requires some form of interaction—that is, it essentially involves the person telling the story as well as at least one listener, viewer, reader, etc. However, stories can be told not only through words and actions, as this definition suggests, but also by other artistic means, such as song, dance, or visual art. Further shaping this notion of storytelling to fit the context of this essay, it is important to clarify that I will be referring to the creation and relating of particular types of stories—specifically, those that recall the personal and collective traumas of the past. With this expanded definition in mind, I will begin this chapter by exploring the attributes of and potential uses for storytelling within transitional justice projects, followed by a deeper look at two essential mechanisms of this process: truth commissions and the arts.

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<sup>3</sup> *Shattered Voices* (123)

## WHY STORYTELLING?

Now that I have established what storytelling is in the most basic sense, I will use this section to ask what it can do and why it is so much a part of the transitional justice process. Drawing upon a diverse assortment of rationales –social, political, psychological, and philosophical –I arrive at complex answers to these questions, which will serve as an interdisciplinary theoretical foundation for my later consideration of truth commissions and the arts as potential venues of storytelling and mechanisms of transitional justice. Key themes that arise here include the use of stories to remember and condemn past abuses in a way that will prevent such atrocities in the future, the need to shatter the lies and silence imposed by the old regime by creating counter-narratives, the therapeutic aspect of storytelling, the importance of restorative justice and giving survivors a space to regain lost voices, and the rebuilding of community through dialogue.

### **“Never Again”**

The declaration, “never again,” or “*nunca más*,” has become a touchstone for societies coming to terms with and moving beyond a traumatic and unacceptable national experience. Often invoked in connection with the Holocaust, the phrase also appears in the titles of several truth commission report titles, including those of Argentina and Guatemala. “Never again” is not only a condemnation of an event, but also a reminder to never forget what has happened. “We must remember what happened in order to keep it from happening again,” explains a Rwandan governmental official, contemplating the genocide that devastated both his country and family (Hayner 1). For history to repeat itself in the form of recurring genocides, disappearances, and other mass human rights abuses is a tragedy that can be combated by the act of remembering. Storytelling plays a central role in this preservation of the essential and painful lessons of the



past. The memories of what has happened are kept alive by their constant retelling –among those who experienced them first hand and then from generation to generation.

Looking from the outside in, this act of remembering and retelling may seem simple, but for societies and individuals still intensely traumatized by the events to which they must continue to bear witness, the process is a constant struggle. Thus a tension between remembering and forgetting is characteristic of these societies and individuals as they move forward. “How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without risking its repetition in the future?,” ponders Ariel Dorfman, Chilean playwright (Minow 119). “It’s difficult to remember, it’s painful to remember,” explains a Salvadorian farm worker, describing the killings he witnessed during the country’s years of civil war (Hayner 2). Because of this element of emotional pain that is inexorably linked with remembering in these types of situations, some argue that the process of storytelling –and thus “reopen[ing] wounds that have already closed” –will hold a society back, rendering it unable to move beyond the horrific events of the past; however if the wounds “were badly closed... they will reopen themselves” (133). Societies and individuals cannot expect to simply draw an impermeable line between past and future and leave traumas completely behind. “Past traumas do not simply pass or disappear with the passage of time,” rather work must be done to remember and understand them in a constructive and undamaging way (Hayner 134). Establishing a lesson that will be a part of the nation’s identity and therefore participating in the prevention of the suffering of others in the future is a powerful reason for individuals to take part in storytelling efforts and for societies to provide a space for the process.

### **Shattering the False Master Narrative, Breaking the Silence**

For memories of the past to be capable of fulfilling their preventive role, they must be carefully constructed. By this I mean that one must consider whose story is being accepted as part of the historical record, the collective memory of the society. Thus far, I have presented storytelling as a choice and action of the victims, however the abusive regime also works to “construct [its] own narrative about [its] activities, thereby creating a ‘master narrative’ about the country and its citizens” (Phelps 46). This story told from the perspective of the government will justify its actions by, for example, labeling its victims as “subversives” or claiming that its actions are necessary for the purpose of national security. While in power, the regime will impose this narrative on the country, silencing all differing and opposing points of view. Therefore, a crucial step in the process of transitional justice is to break this silence through the deconstruction and exposure of the falseness of this master narrative and to replace it with a more truthful account of what has happened, what one might call a *counter-narrative*.

This new narrative must represent a “dialogical truth,” or “social truth,” a “truth of experience that is established through interaction, discussion, and debate” (Phelps 62). Thus, the society in transition is not looking to establish another rigid master narrative based on “microscopic” truths, accepting only those accounts that are “factual, verifiable, and can be documented;” rather it must consider the stories of all who wish to participate, formulating a much broader truth of what has happened (Phelps 62). Of course, not every story told of the past atrocities can or will be true in the sense that it is proven, however this does not mean that truths that cannot be confirmed in some official way are less valuable or should be left out of the nation’s understanding and memory of the past. “Not all truths are morally equivalent. Yet it would be a mistake to think of truth as invariable, indisputable, or the exclusive claim of one

group” (Fair 26). The notion that there is a single uncontestable *Truth* that can be uncovered in the exploration of the past is false. “There is never just one truth: we carry our own distinct memories, and they sometimes contradict each other” (Hayner 163). Thus, while this process of truth gathering must work to undermine the false master narrative of the old regime, it must also be careful not to “tether the survivor” and the nation “to one rigid version of the past,” as this would “hinder recovery” (Brison 103). Creating a new official and inflexible narrative of the past to replace the old one may be successful in discrediting the story that once “conceal[ed] and justify[d]” the abuses under authoritarianism, however it will fall short of providing the recuperating society and individuals with the space they need to process the traumas in the form of an inclusive and continual dialogue (Phelps 47).

It is easy to romanticize this idea of breaking with the past through storytelling, however not all individuals who choose to offer their personal stories, or truths, to this national counter-narrative will feel positive about the experience. Indeed, it is important to recognize that telling one’s story and speaking out against the actions of the fallen regime is a potentially risky endeavor for individual victims. In her book, *Unspeakable Truths*, Priscilla B. Hayner takes care in pointing out the impediments to and dangers of public storytelling. One of the main difficulties she touches upon is the potential for “retraumatization” in giving testimony (particularly before a truth commission) (Hayner 141). While I have already considered the emotional pain associated with working to remember past abuses, in some cases there may be even more serious consequences (psychological, physical, and social). For some, “open[ing] up” and sharing the story of a traumatic event may “result in a multitude of debilitating physical symptoms, such as confusion, nightmares, exhaustion, lack of appetite, and sleeplessness” that “first appear[ed] immediately following the... event, but then came back... upon recalling the

details” (Hayner 141). This reexperiencing of physical symptoms is often linked to Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Hayner 141). In these cases, it is important that storytelling not be a one-time event, but rather a piece in a larger process that the victim has the opportunity to work through with the help of additional one-on-one therapy. Beyond this psychological risk, there may also be physical dangers associated with telling a story that challenges and/or implicates the past regime. “Former perpetrators” may still be living freely in the same communities as their victims and may even retain powerful positions within the society, thus there is the potential for violent retaliation (Hayner 136). Socially there are risks as well. For instance, many women who suffer from “sexual abuse and rape” face “social stigma, embarrassment, and shame” from their families and communities if they choose to share their stories (Hayner 77). Clearly, telling one’s story is a courageous act. The silence must be broken and history must be rewritten in order for the society to rebuild itself and move towards its goals of democracy and peace, however it is crucial to acknowledge the potentially high price that is paid by those who choose to participate in the storytelling that is at the heart of this process. The fact that so many individuals have decided to tell their stories despite all of these risks is a powerful indication of the importance storytelling in these situations.

### **Reentering Humanity and Individual Healing**

Telling one’s story –whether verbally, visually, through written words or movement –is a powerful assertion of “*I am*.” “...Making stories of our lives is what we humans *do*. It is the fundamental means by which we assert and describe our humanity,” explains Theresa Godwin Phelps in her book, *Shattered Voices*, which draws connections between the use of language and violence (55). According to Phelps, storytelling is “an essential human act” (56). Regaining the ability to narrate and being given or finding the space to do so allows victims to transform into

*survivors*, declaring that they are alive and that they matter (Phelps 56). In this way, storytelling allows these survivors, who may feel as though they were reduced to something less-than-human by their abusers, to see themselves as human again. Another dimension of this intrinsic need to tell one's story is the fact that humans are social beings; thus, "our identity depends upon our place in relation to other and to our community" (Phelps 58). Individuals must formulate and tell their stories not only for themselves –to "assert and describe" themselves as human –but also to contextualize that understanding of self within a broader picture and to form relationships with others (Phelps 55). "As we shape the discordant events of our lives into a coherent narrative, we also discover our 'place' in larger units: in our families, communities and nations" (Phelps 58). "During the years of oppression, violence, fear, and silence many people" will become disoriented and lose their understanding of who they are and where they fit within their society; the act of storytelling must then be part of the transition away from this period of abuse and repression as it is an innately human way of defining self, and self in relation to others (Phelps 58).

Moving beyond this fundamental explanation of the need to engage in storytelling after mass-scale trauma, storytelling is perhaps most recognized in connection with the process of individual healing. "The notion that storytelling is healing is based on several psychological studies demonstrating that individuals who repress intense emotional pain can suffer from physical and psychological problems," explains Eric Stover, author of *The Witnesses*, a book that examines the experiences of victims who testified before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) (29). Indeed psychologists Ana Julia Cienfuegos and Cristina Monelli who worked in a "mental health program" for "victims of political persecution" in Chile found that giving "testimony" was "effective in providing symptomatic relief for certain

patients” (Cienfuegos 43). In their 1982 paper, “The Testimony of Political Repression as a Therapeutic Instrument,” they concluded that, “testimony can be an effective therapeutic instrument with psychiatric patients who have suffered political persecution, cruel and degrading torture, imprisonment, or prolonged detention in concentration camps” (Cienfuegos 49). Effectiveness, or “success,” was defined as cases in which “testimony led to mitigation of the most acute symptoms, such as anxiety or acute depression, sleeplessness, bouts of weeping, etc.” (Cienfuegos 48). Yet, this is just one example of types of evidence that point to storytelling as a useful healing modality.

There is also a great deal of qualitative evidence that illustrates the power of giving testimony, particularly in the form of first-hand accounts of those who have turned to storytelling in one way or another, as part of their healing processes. For example, at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), a man “blinded as the result of an assault by a police officer” explained after testifying, ““I feel what has been making me sick all the time in the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now... it feels like I got my sight back by coming here”” (Kiss 72). Another testifier recalls,

...when I testified at the public hearing, it was very good. It was the first time I had told what had happened to me. After the death of my son, I stayed many years not talking about it. It was killing me inside. I thought, “why me, Lord?” It gave me quite a problem... Giving testimony, telling the whole world what happened to me –It was painful, but also a relief. (Hayner 138)

In both of these powerful statements, the individuals describe their feelings before and after telling their stories. Their personal experiences validate the psychological findings that

repressing stories of trauma will lead to problems and that developing and telling the story of these painful experiences will provide relief.

Of course, there is no magic formula for healing nor should the process of storytelling itself be viewed as a panacea for the effects of past trauma; however there are some steps that can be taken to use storytelling most effectively. Beginning with the narrative itself, it is crucial that the survivor be given the opportunity to say what he or she wants to say in the way he or she wants to say it. As Cienfuegos and Monelli found, their patients, as survivors of traumatic human rights abuse, needed to “reexperience their suffering in their own words” (49). The “memories” included in this narrative will not consist of simple, objective “snapshots” of the traumatic event(s), but rather be influenced by the “emotions” that the survivor attaches to them and by “knowledge acquired after the event” (Stover 6). In this way, the survivor will formulate a story of what happened based on how he or she felt at the time and how he or she currently perceives the event. Thus, this story will evolve over time, as new memories, emotions and facts are recalled or found. He or she will work to tell and retell “the story of the trauma...completely, in depth and in detail” (Herman 175). And, “after many repetitions, the moment comes when the telling of the trauma story no longer arouses quite such intense feelings. It becomes part of the survivor’s experience, but only one part of it” (Herman 195).

Beyond the content of the narrative itself, one of the most important considerations in the storytelling process is the audience, or person(s) who receive and acknowledge the story. Psychoanalyst Dori Laub argues that, “...survivors need the presence of two *listeners* –an external listener who acknowledges the reality of the survivor’s lived experience, and an internal listener, an agency of the self, who helps comprehend what one has witnessed” (Stover 30). Thus, storytelling is a process that requires two or more participants, the survivor and his or her

external listener(s). Susan J. Brison, a survivor of sexual assault herself and the author of the book, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*, also stresses the importance of the audience in efforts to heal through storytelling. She explains, “It is not sufficient for mastering the trauma to construct a narrative of it: one must (physically, publically) say or write (or paint or film) the narrative and others must see or hear it in order for one’s survival as an autonomous self to be complete” (Brison 62). This public element of storytelling is very important in the outlet of truth commissions, some of which were open to the public and others not. In order to fully accept and integrate the story of trauma into the larger narrative of one’s life, it is crucial to have another person confirm and acknowledge the story, saying, *yes, this happened to you. I believe you. It was wrong*. Thus, the listener(s) must be receptive and empathetic in order to aid the storyteller in his or her healing process.

“‘Telling’ [is] the only possibility for release from painful and humiliating memories;” yet, simply revealing what has happened will not be a sufficient way of healing, rather several important pieces must be in place to correctly facilitate the process (Cienfuegos 50). The content of the narrative, the way in which it is expressed, and the audience that receives it are the fundamental elements to consider in looking critically at both truth commissions and the arts as venues for storytelling in connection with this goal of healing. For storytelling to fulfill this potential therapeutic role in the transitional justice period, one must ask of its mechanisms: *Does this space allow survivors to fully explain what happened to them? Can they do so in their own words? Are there limitations on the stories told, who tells them, and in what way? Who is acknowledging the stories and how?*



## Restorative Justice and Rebalancing

Moving beyond the goal of healing, after a profound harm is brought upon an individual and/or a society, there is usually a clamoring for *Justice*; however rarely do people think critically about what justice is or ought to be. Traditionally, the idea of justice is thought of in the retributive sense; that is, holding perpetrators accountable through punishment that is decided by official adjudication. However many scholars in the field of transitional justice believe that this “tendency to equate justice with retribution must be challenged” (Kiss 69). Indeed, trials are not an ideal venue for the essential process of storytelling. First of all, “after a dictatorship or repressive government, the judiciary is often left in shambles: judges politically compromised, corrupt, or timid; expertise lacking; and resources few” (Hayner 12). In the wake of mass abuse, “there may simply not be enough courtrooms, lawyers, witnesses, experts or time for prosecuting all who deserve it” (Minow 45). Yet even under ideal circumstances, it is not in the nature of prosecutions to meet the needs of the victim in terms of storytelling. While storytelling does, to some extent, happen through trials, this setting is imperfect and allows for witnesses only to tell a partial version of what has happened. As Phelps explains,

Rules of procedure, strictly observed, can impede open storytelling... What a witness or victim may say is constrained. Most testimony about feelings, personal impact, or harms not entirely relevant to the matter at hand is impermissible, and thereby goes unsaid. Under diligent cross-examination, doubt may be cast on even a truthful witness’s story. (63)

The purpose of trials is “to find whether the criminal standard of proof has been satisfied on specific charges,” not to provide an open storytelling venue for the victims of crime (Hayner 100). In this way, prosecutions are more focused on the perpetrator and less victim-centered.

Thus, while trials may be an important piece of the transition away from a period of abuse and repression, they can be no means be seen as a panacea or the only recourse that can bring about a sense of justice.

Turning to a broader conception of justice, one finds that there is much more to this idea than the tradition of punishment for crime; in fact, if one also thinks of justice in the restorative sense, storytelling is not only more easily incorporated into the process, but actually becomes an important piece of it. Restorative justice “is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships –with healing, harmony and reconciliation” (Kiss 69). In thinking of justice as a process of rebalancing the power to the victim that was taken away by his or her abuser, storytelling plays a key role. In her book, Phelps argues that what is taken in abuse and must be restored is the “ability to use language” (5). She explains, “the critical ingredient of the rebalancing, then, is not pain or violence, but a retold story, a reconstruction of a shattered voice” (Phelps 44). Giving the survivor the opportunity to realize that he or she still has a voice and the space to demonstrate this agency “after [he or she] has been reduced to silence, to the status of an object, or worse, made into someone else’s speech, an instrument of another’s agency,” is a crucial step in transferring the power away from the abuser and back to the victim, reestablishing their equality (Brison 55). Thus, storytelling is itself a form of justice when thinking in the restorative sense.

### **Preparing for Democracy and Rebuilding a Community**

A democracy –the form of government transitioning states are aiming to create –is based on core values such as equality, freedom, and inclusion; therefore the state’s development of mechanisms of transitional justice that embody and promote these same ideals is a logical first step towards building this type of government. Mechanisms that incorporate a storytelling

process are particularly suited to these democratic values for a number of reasons. “The new democratic state that emerges from the ashes of the old state” can use storytelling mechanisms to introduce its people to the values that will govern the new society (Phelps 80). First, because the type of storytelling advocated for in this essay is extremely inclusive, all are invited to participate and the value of what each person is able to contribute to the broader understanding of and reaction to what has happened is acknowledged. Furthermore, recalling the idea of a social truth, when a society seeks to deal with the past via an inclusive dialogue –“interaction, discussion, and debate” –between stories/storytellers, one can certainly begin to see the path from this transitional mechanism to the envisioned new democracy take shape (Phelps 62). “For a country to enable and encourage its citizens to come forward and tell stories reflects an attitude that the country desires its citizens to be responsible moral agents and no longer passive victims” (Phelps 59). Indeed, these storytellers –testing out their newfound agency and authority as participants in truth commissions, the arts, and other storytelling venues –are the citizens who will be given the power and responsibility to shape their new society by exercising their right to vote, freedoms of expression, and other liberties. By being given the opportunity to participate in these mechanisms of transition that promote the same values (freedom, inclusion, equality, etc.) that are the foundation of the democracy that their state is becoming, these individuals will be better prepared to adjust to and to embrace the new society, and even be “better citizens” (Phelps 59).

In the same vein, storytelling supports the community building and reconciliation that is necessary for any type of society, but especially a new democracy, to be successful and peaceful. “Stories build consensus, a common culture of shared understandings, and deeper, more vital ethics,” all pieces of the united and cohesive community, which is no doubt a central piece of the vision a society has of itself as it moves beyond a violent past (Delgado 2414). “Stories help to

bridge the chasm between the past, in which the people were enemies of each other, and the present, in which former adversaries coexist as fellow citizens” (Phelps 59). After mass-scale repression and abuse, perpetrator, victim, and bystander will inevitably be forced to live side-by-side in the new society. Storytelling, processing the events of the past in both an individual and a public communal way, will be key to easing the tensions between these groups so that they can coexist, even if many chose neither to forgive nor to forget what has happened. Furthermore, in this process of storytelling, the line between victim and perpetrator tends to blur, and a broader “community of survivors” can emerge (Phelps 59). This shift from antagonism to solidarity can only be achieved by recognizing the common humanity of all involved, a discovery that often comes naturally after an exchange of personal narratives.

### **Conclusions on the Roles of Storytelling**

Why must the collective and individual stories of past abuse be (re)told after the violence ends and as a new democracy is being born? Storytelling has the potential to aid societies and individuals as they seek to remember the past, uncover the truth, heal, define and achieve justice, and create a peaceful democratic state. However, the extent to which storytelling can achieve these potential positive effects (and avoid potential pitfalls –i.e. retraumatization) will depend in great part on the where and how it is done. Truth commissions and the arts are two spaces in which storytelling can and has taken place during periods of transitional justice. Thinking generally and as well as pulling more specific examples for the Latin American context, I will now begin to identify the strengths and limitations of these distinct venues in terms of what they offer to the type of storytelling process that I have identified as being so crucial.

## TRUTH COMMISSIONS

### A Brief Background on Truth Commissions

The widely utilized transitional justice mechanism of the truth commission is a relatively recent development. “Truth commissions...did not exist before the 1970s” (Phelps 77). However in this brief period of less than fifty years, there have been more than twenty commissions, each uniquely designed to meet the needs of a particular nation and its circumstances (Phelps 78). In general, the term truth commission has come to refer to “an official investigation into a past pattern of abuse” (Hayner 23). These bodies have varied though in size, mandate, founding institution (“a new president, ...the legislature, [or] ...an outside organization, such as the United Nations”), powers, and many other factors (Phelps 78). In Hayner’s book, which looks extensively at truth commissions, she focuses on Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, South Africa, and Guatemala as the most “substantial truth commissions to date” based on “their size, the impact they had on their respective political transitions, and the national and international attention they received” (32). It is clear from this list that Latin American countries in particular tend to utilize truth commissions as a tool of transition, with four of the five most important commissions in recent history taking place within the region. It is also important to note that the three cases examined in this essay (Argentina, Chile, Guatemala) are among the most instructive examples of this mechanism according to Hayner.

While many variables and distinctions exist, Hayner finds “five basic aims” of all truth commissions: “to discover, clarify and formally acknowledge past abuses; to respond to specific needs of victims; to contribute to justice and accountability; to outline institutional responsibility and recommend reforms; and to promote reconciliation and reduce conflict over the past” (24). Generally speaking, all commissions are “designed to investigate the human rights violations

committed in the recent past, are usually temporary in nature, and are charged with giving an official report of their findings” (Phelps 78). The information gathered by truth commissions comes from a variety of sources and can be obtained in many ways. In most cases, individuals come to a particular location to testify (publically or privately) before the commission’s staff. Commission members may also go out and actively seek information in the form of individual testimonies and/or physical evidence (Phelps 79). In the end, the role of the truth commission “is not to judge but to gather information and make it known” (Phelps 78).

### ***Argentina***

The Argentine case “is recognized as the first serious attempt to use a truth commission to reckon with the past” (Phelps 82). Established through presidential decree within days of the inauguration of democratically elected President Raúl Alfonsín, the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* or National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP) began work on December 29, 1983 (Phelps 82). Alfonsín appointed ten commission members, “chosen for their consistent stance in defense of human rights and their representation of different walks of life” (Hayner 33). He also asked both chambers of congress to appoint three representatives to the committee, however only the Chamber of Deputies chose to do so (Phelps 83). The commission was given 180 days to interview, investigate, and write their report, focusing on cases of disappearance (Phelps 83). CONADEP “lacked power to compel the production of information from perpetrators or from the military” (Hayner 34). It gathered its information by hearing individual testimonies in its central office in downtown Buenos Aires; sending representatives to other provinces and rural areas in Argentina, as well as abroad, to “collect stories”; and visiting secret detention centers, morgues, prisons, and police stations (Phelps 83-

4). The commission held no public hearings, but managed to maintain a “prominent public profile” in other ways (Hayner 34).

Over the course of just nine months, the commission managed to take over 7,000 statements, which documented 8,900 disappeared persons (Hayner 94). In a ceremony on September 20, 1984, CONADEP’s final report, *Nunca Más (Never Again)* was presented to President Alfonsín (Phelps 84). A shorter, “book-length version” of the report was also published and became an “immediate best-seller,” with 40,000 copies sold on the first day of its release (Hayner 34). CONADEP also hosted a television program to publicize and explain the report and findings (Phelps 84). One of the most interesting pieces of the aftermath of this commission’s work is the role the information it gathered played in the criminal prosecutions of members of the abusive military junta. CONADEP was able to send over 1,000 files to the judiciary, which used the information as evidence in trials, including those that succeeded in sentencing five top generals to time in prison (Phelps 84, Hayner 34).

### ***Chile***

Similarly to the story of CONADEP, Chile’s *Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación* or National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation, commonly known as the Rettig Commission after its chairman, Raúl Rettig, was created by presidential decree by the country’s newly elected president, Patricio Aylwin in April 1990 (Grandin). Aylwin appointed an eight-member commission, consisting of “four members who had supported Pinochet” and “four who had been in opposition” in order to avoid any claims of bias about the commission’s work (Hayner 35). The Rettig Commission’s “mandate was limited to investigating and disclosing details of events that ended in death or the presumption of death” (Phelps 92). Thus, “those who were tortured and survived were not listed as victims, their cases not investigated”

(Hayner 36). During its nine months of operation, the commission drew upon information previously gathered by UN and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports, conducted interviews and investigations, and contacted those who had fled abroad (Phelps 92). In individual meetings, witnesses and families of the dead and disappeared met with a lawyer, a law student assistant, and a social worker “to tell not only *what* had happened, but also... how they felt” (Phelps 92). Unfortunately, like CONADEP, “it had no power of subpoena...and received little cooperation from the armed forces” in its investigation (Hayner 36).

On February 9, 1991 the report was delivered to President Aylwin. On March 4<sup>th</sup>, he released it to the public via a television address, during which “he apologized for the crimes committed by the state agents and asked the military to acknowledge its role in the oppression and the crimes” (Phelps 93). The military, however, rejected the report, which later became a best-selling three-volume book (Phelps 93). The report received “limited public attention,” but was successful in prompting the government’s creation of the National Corporation for Reparation and Reconciliation, a “follow-up commission” “to search for the remains of the disappeared, resolve cases still left open, organize the commission’s files... and institute the reparations program” (Hayner 37).

### ***Guatemala***

Guatemala’s *Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico* (CEH) or Commission for Historical Clarification was created as part of the peace agreement signed by the government and the leftist URNG in Oslo, Norway in June of 1994 (Hayner 45). Three years later, this UN-administered commission, staffed by both Guatemalans and non-Guatemalans, began its work (Grandin). “Unlike the strict mandates of CONADEP and the Rettig Commission, CEH’s instructions did not define the crimes to be examined, the period to be considered, or the



commission's methodology" (Grandin). Thus, this commission had much more flexibility, choosing to examine not only the abuses committed during the devastating four-decade civil war, but also the country's history of racism and the question of "genocidal intent" on the part of the military (Grandin). CEH's staff went to great lengths to gather testimony, "trek[ing] through back roads and footpaths to reach scattered communities –in some cases walking for six or eight hours through the mountains" (Hayner 47). The commission also received information from NGOs and previously completed "alternative truth efforts," such as the Recovery of Historical Memory Project of the Catholic Church's Human Rights Office (REMHI), which had collected thousands of statements via local interviews and "church networks" (Hayner 47).

In February 1999, CEH released its report, *Memoria del silencio (Memory of Silence)*, with "an emotional ceremony attended by thousands of persons in the National Theatre in Guatemala City" (Hayner 48). In total, the commission documented over 42,000 victims, "including over 23,000 killed and 6,000 disappeared, and documented 626 massacres" (Hayner 48). CEH also concluded that, "agents of the State of Guatemala, within the framework of counterinsurgency carried out between 1981 and 1983, committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people" ("Guatemala: Memory of Silence"). The report also included a chapter of recommendations to the state, which were committed to in the inaugural speech of President Alfonso Portillo in 2000.

### **The Strengths of Latin America's Truth Commissions as Venues of Storytelling**

"Over the past two decades, truth commissions have been established [to]... mark the border between what... societies were –intolerant, fevered, arbitrary –and what they hope they have become –peaceful, impartial, protective" (Grandin). While this is certainly the aspiration of these powerful mechanisms of transitional justice, to what extent have they actually been

successful in helping their societies, and the individuals within them, to cope with a violent past and begin to move forward? By highlighting some of the shared characteristics of truth commissions of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, turning first to their strengths as storytelling venues (in this section) and then to their limitations (in the next), one can begin to answer this question.

### ***Official Acknowledgement***

All of these truth commissions are official bodies, administered, or at least recognized, by the new government. This is significant to the stories told before the commissions for a number of reasons. First, as Hayner points out, “the damage [of “widespread abuses by the state”] goes far beyond the immediate pain of loss... When the repression ends, [there is] a need to slowly learn to trust the government, the police, and armed forces, and to gain confidence in the freedom to speak freely and mourn openly” (4). Thus, by establishing a truth commission and therefore opening up a space for victims, perpetrators, and witnesses to give testimony, a government signals to its people that it condemns the actions of the past regime and that it values open storytelling about its abuses as a tool in rebuilding the nation. For example in the case of Chile’s Rettig Commission, commissioner José Zalaquett explains,

The families had refused to allow the previous government authorities to see them cry as they searched for their loved ones. But now [at the commission] they are being received with respect and offered a seat and a cup of coffee. The Chilean flag was on the desk as befits an official commission. They often broke down, because now they could allow themselves that measure of relief. (Phelps 92)

A huge departure from the silence enforced by the abusive regime, the inclusion of truth commissions among the official mechanisms of transition creates a climate that encourages

storytelling and respects victims, not just at the commission itself but also more broadly. In this way, truth commissions can be seen as a positive step in fostering the mutual respect and trust between the new government and its citizens that will make storytelling possible.

The fact that truth commissions are official bodies is also significant for the storytelling that takes place within their investigations when one recalls the importance of role of the audience or “external listeners” to the process (Stover 30). The person(s) who hears and acknowledges an individual’s account is a key consideration in terms of the potential benefits derived from storytelling. Having a commissioner, an agent of the state-sponsored truth commission, listen to and record your story, and knowing that it will influence a larger report presented to the president, nation, and international community, creates an extremely strong sense of power and importance. After being forced to live with the lies and abuses of the old regime for so long, those who choose to testify before a truth commission are able to gain official acknowledgement of their stories; *subversives* become *victims* or *survivors*, murders and disappearances are confirmed and counted, and a “truth-telling cycle” begins (Phelps 120). “Enforced silence disallows grieving, compassion, and normal human emotions that require external expression” (Phelps 47). By establishing a truth commission, the new government officially breaks this damaging silence and conveys that it is a willing and empathetic listener to the stories that need to be told.

***The Report: Permanent Documentation of the Reconstructed National Narrative***

“Nothing will remain of you; not a name in a register, not a memory in a living brain. You will be annihilated in the past as well as the future. You will never have existed,” the torturer threatens his victim in George Orwell’s *1984* (Milton 104). This complete obliteration was no doubt the fear of many who were persecuted by the repressive authoritarian regimes of

Latin America. Fortunately, these abusive governments were not as enduring as they had imagined themselves to be, and when they were eventually removed from power, thousands of victims, families of victims, and witnesses survived with stories to tell. The truth commissions of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala were established not only to hear these stories but also to produce a public record in the form of a written report at the end of their investigations, documenting and naming the victims of the crimes within their mandates. This reporting piece of the truth commissions' work makes them a particularly apt venue for storytelling. On an individual level, "we affirm the dignity and agency of those who have been brutalized by attending to their voices and making their stories a part of the historical record" (Kiss 73). Furthermore, "to know that your story is now accessible in the books means, that you are no longer alone its sole keeper" (Shriver 28). This leads to personal feelings of relief and agency for having told one's story in a forum where it is both acknowledged and permanently recorded. There is also a sense of purpose and achievement involved because the story will now be used in the larger, national project of truth-gathering.

Because storytelling before a truth commission is attached to contributing in some way to its final report, testifiers are not only personally validated by telling their stories before these bodies, but also become an important factor in their society's understanding of and reckoning with the larger pattern of abuses. "The report of a truth commission reclaims a country's history and opens it up for public review" (Hayner 25). In this process, the lies of the old regime are exposed and a new account of the period of oppression is formulated with the information gathered by the commission. The report also becomes a "public warning sign against the repetition of such injustices in the future" (Shriver 29). Each individual who testifies before the

truth commission can feel a sense of responsibility for these achievements of the report; this is a huge benefit of and incentive to choosing to tell one's story before a truth commission.

***Contributions to the Quest for Retributive Justice and Accountability***

In the case of Argentina's CONADEP<sup>4</sup>, the information gathered by the commission was used directly as evidence in the prosecutions of perpetrators of the state violence. As I mentioned in the explanation of this commission, CONADEP was able to send a substantial number of files to the judiciary, contributing to the conviction of several high-ranking former officers for their crimes in connection with the disappearances investigated by the truth commission. Thus, in this case, those who told their stories before the commission knew that their testimony had the power to punish those who had abused them and/or their loved ones. Adding the potential of achieving retributive justice through prosecutions to the elements of restorative justice that come from storytelling before the commission makes the experience even more powerful and life-changing for victims.

Beyond this direct link between CONADEP and prosecutions in the case of Argentina, there are other ways that truth commissions can create a sense of accountability for the perpetrators of the abuses described by testifiers. As Hayner reveals, "while resulting in no fine, imprisonment, or other judicially imposed punishment, a truth commission's conclusions may well have a negative impact for the persons or institutions that are named as responsible for abuses" (230). Just because a perpetrator is not legally implicated for his or her crimes, this does not mean that he or she can escape the potential social stigma of having the finger pointed at him or her in the story of a survivor. And even if a survivor or truth commission report does not name names, "to assign responsibility for killings or torture to one sector of the military or police

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<sup>4</sup> Though not true for the truth commissions of Chile or Guatemala

might (and should) have implications for the future of that force and the culpability of the commanding officer” (Hayner 230). Thus accountability need not always take the retributive form of adjudication to be meaningful; and, in this way, those who told their stories before the truth commissions of Chile and Guatemala may too have altered the lives of their abusers.

### **Limitations of Storytelling at the Argentine, Chilean, and Guatemalan Truth Commissions**

#### ***Lack of Public Space***

Moving from the strengths of truth commissions as storytelling venues, to their weaknesses, the characteristic of the Latin American commissions that is most problematic is their lack of public hearings. To date, “no Latin American truth commission has ever held public hearings, nor seriously considered doing so” (Hayner 226). The victims of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala would have had a very different storytelling experience had they testified before an audience of their countrymen, rather than just commissioners and other truth commission staff. On a personal or individual level, “by giving victims and survivors a chance to tell their story before a public audience, a commission formally acknowledges and can even symbolically offer an apology for past wrongs” (Hayner 225). Thinking beyond the treatment of individual testifiers and to the effects the truth commission is able to have on the society as a whole, Hayner points out that, “by bringing the victim’s voices directly to the public... a commission can encourage public understanding and sympathy for the victims, reduce the likelihood of continued denial of the truth by large sectors of society, and increase public support and appreciation for the commission’s work” (225). Thus, in order to optimize the potential benefits of storytelling both for individuals and a society, truth commissions ought to hold public hearings, as well utilize other means of public exposure such as television and radio broadcast.

Although the truth commissions of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala may have missed an important opportunity to provide the benefits that come from linking individual storytellers to a larger public audience, their lack of public hearings does not mean that they did not have other ways of making their work known. Take, for example, the case of Argentina. When CONADEP's staff arrived in a province to hear testimony, "there were press conferences, interviews, [and] round tables for information purposes at which media were present" (Phelps 84). Thus, while "the telling and collecting of the stories... was done in private [with] victim and commission member alone, behind closed doors," the fact that this process was going on was "publically known" (Phelps 84). And, as I previously mentioned, after its report was submitted, CONADEP hosted a television program to publicize and explain its conclusions, and a bestselling book version of the report was produced (Phelps 84). Yet while these smaller attempts to garner a public audience and increase the transparency of their work were clearly important, they were still no substitute for the holding of public hearings.

### ***More Harm than Healing?***

The previously discussed psychological, physical, social risks that can be associated with telling one's story, especially by testifying before a truth commission, are clearly limitations of this mechanism. Testifying before a truth commission is a singular event. While "telling one's story can be very emotional, especially for those who have never told their stories before," "psychologists question the idea of a one-time catharsis resulting in real psychological healing" (Hayner 139). Hayner provides a harsh reminder that, despite the fact that storytelling can be a healing modality in certain circumstances, "the central aim of a truth commission is not therapy" (139). Testifying before a truth commission is different for each person, "'for some people, it's the first step; for others, it's the last step, a completion. But there are a lot of people that feel

devastated afterwards” (Hayner 141). In general, it cannot replace the process of working through of one’s emotional pain with a trained therapist, particularly because truth commissions must focus on their goal of “gather[ing] as much detailed information from the greatest number of victims as possible” and therefore ask testifiers to “tell their full, horrid story in one relatively short meeting, typically an hour,” during which they go “to the heart of the deponent’s most painful memories” (Hayner 139). On top of this, “most interviewers... have little or no training in responding to this level of trauma” (Hayner 140). It is in the nature of truth commissions, not just those of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, to focus on truth-gathering rather than attempting to heal the individuals who testify before them. In this sense, a major purpose of storytelling cannot be achieved when individuals tell their stories at truth commissions and do not go on to explore other venues for sharing their personal narratives of trauma.

### ***Who Gets to Tell the Stories?***

In analyzing truth commissions, it is important to recognize that the storytelling that takes place within this mechanism is not completely open nor inclusive; each commission has its own unique mandate that dictates the offenses it is able to investigate, often specifying date, location, etc. For example, Chile’s Rettig Commission only investigated “disappearances after arrest, executions, and torture leading to death committed by government agents or people in their service” (Hayner 36). “Its mandate excluded those cases of torture that did not result in death,” therefore survivors of torture were not considered amongst the victims as defined by the commission (Hayner 36). By excluding many who were brutalized by the past regime from participation in its official storytelling venue, Chile sent the message to these individuals that what had happened to them was not as serious or important enough to include in their record of the abuses of the period. The dead of course needed to be honored as the nation attempted to



move past its history of violence, but the consideration of the living victims should have been recognized as equally, if not more, important in these times. While they may have preferred to be identified as survivors rather than victims, unimaginable harms were still brought upon them for which they needed opportunities to heal and reclaim their dignity and agency in order to rebuild their shattered lives. Being turned away from the truth commission, survivors of state violence in Chile were forced to question the value of their stories in the eyes of their new government and to look for other venues through which to express themselves and the trauma they had experienced.

Thinking more practically, however, it is obvious that truth commissions are not able to consult every person who experienced the period of massive violence that it investigates—not even everyone who considers him or herself to be a victim or a survivor. Although each of these individuals can no doubt contribute to the truth-seeking endeavor and, ideally, ought to be included in any and all national efforts to remember and move beyond the traumas of the past, truth commissions do not have unlimited resources; on the contrary, they are usually understaffed, pressed for time, and lack adequate funds. Considering this, as well as the realities of the post-authoritarian social, economic, and political terrain, it becomes apparent why these bodies are limited in the cases they are able to investigate. Excluding certain victims, however, makes truth commissions a less-than-ideal space for the type of storytelling that needs to take place in the transitional moments that these bodies are meant to address. Because of the necessarily limited scope of truth commissions, one must be at least a bit skeptical of their capabilities, asking: *As a victim, how would it feel to be told that you are ineligible to tell your story? Would you feel differently if you could be sure that your exclusion were based on*

*practical considerations as opposed to the political agenda of the new government? How can a society move forward if there are voices still struggling to be heard?*

## **Conclusions**

Truth commissions are a fascinating and potentially very powerful mechanism of transitional justice. In the cases of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, these bodies played a key role in the attempt to move from a period of massive human rights abuse to the beginnings of a more democratic and peaceful nation. Looking closely at these three examples and thinking critically about the storytelling opportunities they offered, it becomes apparent that these truth commissions were not perfect. On the one hand, the stories told before CONADEP, the Rettig Commission, and CEH, were officially acknowledged, became part of a permanent record of the authoritarian oppression, and contributed to holding the offending state agents accountable in a variety of ways. But these positive aspects must be considered alongside those factors that limit the experiences of storytellers and impacts of stories told; a lack of public hearings, the potential for negative side effects due to the one-time-only experience offered by the commissions, and the exclusion of certain stories from the scope of their mandates are all negative realities of these bodies. Thus, one begins to wonder, what other storytelling venues exist as an alternative and/or complement to the truth commission? While a great deal of literature exists on the topic of truth commissions, as well as the other established mechanisms such as prosecutions and reparations programs, their alternatives have not been as extensively considered. For example, the arts are well worth considering as an unofficial mechanism of transitional justice, as I argue in the following chapters by providing cases from Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala in which artists have told both their own personal stories as well as the larger story of past abuse in their country.

## THE ARTS

For Argentina, Chile, Guatemala, and any other country with a history of state terror, dealing with the legacies of trauma and developing into a nation unified by new democratic values is a gargantuan task, a process that takes decades and still may never reach a point where it can be considered to be fully complete. During this period of transitional justice, “the extent to which truth commissions and ‘official’ processes of remembering will improve the prospects for overcoming legacies of authoritarianism depends on the degree to which they are linked to and allow for broader social processes” (Sieder 185). In other words, the presence of alternative grassroots efforts and venues for storytelling is just as significant to the outcomes of the transitional period as the establishment of officially-administered mechanisms, such as truth commissions, trials, etc. In contemplating what form(s) these unofficial processes may take, the arts emerge as a particularly strong possibility. In this section, I will examine what the arts (theatre, dance, the plastic arts, music, etc.) offer to individuals and societies as they attempt to formulate and share their stories of past trauma. Why can we consider arts to be an alternative mechanism of transitional justice? How do the arts allow individuals and societies to access the potential benefits of storytelling? In what ways does storytelling through the arts differ from testifying before a truth commission? I address these questions first in a general or philosophical sense before moving to an analysis of specific works that emerged in the context of the transitional moments of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala in Chapters 3,4, and 5.

### **The Arts and Transitional Justice**

#### ***Alternative Vocabularies***

In her book, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins examines the “aftermath” of great “catastrophe[s],” such as war, abuse, and other traumas (1). She explains that “what we

call trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us... become our tormentors” (Edkins 4). Thus, the experiencing and/or witnessing of traumatic events causes us to “question our settled assumptions about who we might be as humans and what we might be capable of. [And] those who survive often feel compelled to bear witness to these discoveries” (Edkins 5). Clearly the need to tell one’s story is great in the wake of personal trauma, especially when it is part of a larger pattern of mass abuse –as was the case for the survivors in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala. However, “the language we speak is part of the social order, and when the order falls apart..., so does the language. What we *can* say no longer makes sense; what we *want* to say, we can’t. There are no words for it. This is the dilemma survivors face.” (Edkins 8). Several other scholars also speak about personal and societal trauma in terms of its destruction of language. For instance, Phelps argues that, “pain and oppression destroy a person’s ability to use language” (5). And Nelly Richard, who examines the case of Chile in her book *The Insubordination of Signs: Political Change, Cultural Transformation, and Poetics of the Crisis*, explains that after the mass-scale trauma, people were left with “the challenge of having to name fragments of experience that were no longer speakable in the language that survived the catastrophe of meaning” (5). Each of these perspectives suggests that, while there is a dire need for storytelling as individuals and their societies move away from and reckon with periods of abuse, finding an appropriate vocabulary through which to express these stories is a fundamental obstacle to the process. This is where the arts enter the picture.

“The traumatic and un verbalized experience... goes beyond any language, and yet, [it] needs to find its way into language” (Bilbija 115). Art can be “an autonomous crafter of languages and... a center for producing new articulations of thought” (Richard 44). In other words, paint strokes, dance movements, musical notes, allegories, and other forms of artistic

expression can serve as alternative vocabularies for telling a story that otherwise feels impossible to articulate. Richard explains, “what artistic-cultural practices do is actively dismantle and reformulate tensions and antagonisms via figurative languages that intervene in social discursivity, redistributing its signs, and changing them into new, multiple, and fluctuating constellations” (67). These new languages created by the arts may be more appropriate for the recounting of trauma than the traditional, non-artistic means of expression. In fact, in the context of therapy, where a patient is attempting to “reconstruct” his/her “trauma story,” Dr. Judith Lewis Herman notes that:

As the narrative closes in on the most unbearable moments, the patient finds it more and more difficult to use words. At times the patient may spontaneously switch to nonverbal methods of communication, such as drawing or painting.

Given the ‘iconic,’ visual nature of traumatic memories, creating pictures may represent the more effective initial approach to these ‘indelible images.’ (176-7)

Clearly, describing a traumatic memory in plain language is not always possible for individuals who are only just beginning to recount and come to terms with their stories. To describe a traumatizing event in such a blunt and unambiguous way as to utter a phrase such as, “*I was raped,*” may be too harsh a reality for many individuals to face for quite some time. Writing a symbolic poem, painting a picture, or coming up with a set of movements to explain the event and one’s feelings associated with it offers survivors a less direct, and perhaps in their minds a more authentic, means of telling their stories.

Beyond this sheer inability to use non-artistic language in describing a traumatic event is the concern of “find[ing] ways of speaking that remain true to the trauma” (Edkins 15). It may not make sense to force a story of trauma into the form of a “linear narrative,” as these

experiences are often fragmented, incorporating the bits and pieces of what a survivor is able to remember along with the various feelings and emotions that were and have become attached to the event(s) (Edkins 15). Thus, in efforts to form individual and collective memories of traumatic events, Edkins suggests that one “encircle the trauma” (15). She explains, “we cannot try to address the trauma directly without risking its gentrification. We cannot remember it as something that took place in time, because this would neutralize it. All we can do is ‘to *encircle* again and again the site’ of trauma, ‘to mark it in its very impossibility” (Edkins 15). This is how such stories can be integrated into our personal and collective memories. The arts become a useful tool here as they offer us an infinite number of authentic and indirect ways of telling our stories.

Unlike testifying before a truth commission, a very specific process dictated by the mandates and goals of these official bodies, turning to the arts as an alternative means of telling one’s story opens up a much broader range of possibilities in terms of available vocabularies. The arts encompass many means of expression: signing, dancing, drawing, painting, writing, and so much more. Furthermore, storytelling through the arts is particularly appropriate for societies undertaking a project of transitional justice because they create new languages amidst the ruins of the post-authoritarian terrain where “taken-for-granted meanings [have] become obsolete” (Robben 125). While official reports, such as those of truth commissions, with their statistics and forensic truths are an important resource for a country to have, both individuals and society as a whole may feel that the trauma they have experienced is more fully and appropriately recounted and documented via the arts.

### *The Audience*

The truth commissions of Latin America did not hold public hearings, and therefore the stories told for the purposes of their investigations could not be heard by a wider audience of these nations' other perpetrators, victims, witnesses, bystanders, etc.<sup>5</sup> This was a major flaw of these bodies. The arts on the other hand, being an unofficial and decentralized form of storytelling, have the potential to be shared publically; thus, the benefits of storytelling can be extended beyond just the individual storyteller to those who view, hear, read, etc. his or her art as well. "Those too afraid or in too much pain" to share their stories "can gain some benefit from hearing the testimony of others who tell of experiences parallel or partially similar to their own" (Minow 69). Especially in terms of using storytelling as a healing modality, "the recounting of trauma is widely believed to have therapeutic value, not only for the individual teller, but also for the collective psyche of the listeners" (Clark 84). In this way, many can benefit from the story of one when it is shared with the public, as many works of art are.

Simply putting stories into the public sphere does not necessarily mean that they will attract much attention. Thus, consideration must also be given to the ability of a story to engage listeners in order to potentially extend to them some therapeutic benefit. The arts –especially in contrast to stories told through an official truth commission report –are a particularly effective way to achieve this type of connection with an audience, as they have the capacity to reach people on a visceral level. Stories told through the arts "are the most powerful conveyers of moral lessons about the past mostly because they allow the audience to connect the present with the past through emotions" (Bilbija 5). With emotions involved, these stories have the potential to resonate deeply with listeners in a positive way, but also to cause controversy. That being said,

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<sup>5</sup> Those testimonies that were included in the reports, however, could be accessed later, after its release.

a clash of views caused by the public sharing of a story represented through the arts is not necessarily a negative outcome. Although it may be disheartening for an artist who hoped to gain the type of empathetic listener(s) akin to what is found in a truth commission setting, conflict can lead to important discussions surrounding the truths addressed in his or her work of art. In this way, the personal engagement of the audience –as they empathize with and relate to, or take issue with a work of art –allows the arts to become a catalyst for a process of continued (re)action.

### ***The Benefits of Being Unofficial***

Just as unofficial processes have limitations, official storytelling venues have their own drawbacks as well. In the introduction to their book, *The Art of Truth-telling about Authoritarian Rule*, scholars Ksenija Bilbija, Jo Ellen Fair, Cynthia E. Milton, and Leigh A. Payne, point out many of the distinctions between official and unofficial forms of truth- or story-telling, advocating for the importance of the arts as an unofficial process essential to addressing the trauma suffered by individuals and societies under authoritarian rule. “Official processes –truth commissions, judicial proceedings, museums, monuments, and the like,” they write, “...do not simply recount, they explain. Their ultimate aim is to forge a national consensus, a shared version of the past designed to advance a particular vision of the nation’s political future” (Bilbija 3). “Official truths appeal to the need to move forward quickly, to put a nation’s difficult past behind it” (Bilbija 4). Thus, they claim that these “official processes rarely, if ever, dominate popular understanding of the past;” instead, “facts and interpretations are multiple and malleable. Contradictory truths are inevitable. Those who have lived through authoritarian rule often deeply want their unofficial versions of events to come out” (Bilbija 3). “Without fanfare, invisible to those unattuned to them, unofficial discourses of truth [namely, the arts] shift



people's perceptions as effectively as any official process or account will do. They become social truths, shared understandings about the past derived from public discussions" (Bilbija 4). In sum, the heart of their argument is that, "official truth-seeking processes are limited. Unofficial and alternative truths about authoritarian rule rise to fill the breach," often via artistic modes of communication (Bilbija 5).

Amongst these distinctions, perhaps the greatest advantage that unofficial processes have in contrast to official truth-seeking bodies is their openness. There is no limited timeframe during which stories can be submitted and/or considered, stories can take a multitude of forms, and anyone can tell them. One of the main limitations of truth commissions, thinking particularly of the case of Chile, is their strict mandate of whose stories they will investigate. Unofficial storytelling outlets, particularly the arts, on the other hand, afford any individual with a story to tell the chance to express himself or herself at whatever time and in whatever form feels most appropriate. In this sense, the ill-effects of the exclusion that is often a part of official processes do not apply to the consideration of unofficial storytelling through the arts. And, in the end, these unofficial accounts, "reflecting the messy subjectivity of lived experience," are the ones that have the real "staying power" (Bilbija 4).

### ***Creating a Record***

While this benefit does not apply universally to the arts, it is still important to acknowledge that some forms of art (the plastic arts, writing, film, etc.) become permanent records of the stories they tell. As I discussed in connection with truth commission reports, knowing that your story will be accessible to you and to others in the future is a powerful feeling. By creating any type of record of our testimonies, we are reassured that our stories can be "reviewed, rewritten, and analyzed at any time" in the future (Cienfuegos 49). In addition, such a

record “has the ability to preserve the past exactly as remembered or experienced” at any given point, and “creates a document of historical value for future generations” (Cienfuegos 49). In this way, creating a record can be important not only for individuals but for their society as well.

In considering what sets the arts apart from truth commissions in terms of storytelling, although they both fulfill this role of creating some sort of permanent record of the past, they do so in radically different ways. Each truth commission report is different; however, by turning to the example of Chile, one can begin to see why these documents are not necessarily an ideal window into the past. Given that this commission was limited to “the investigation of cases that resulted in death or the presumption of death,” there were obviously no living victims to give first-hand accounts of their experiences (Phelps 93). Still, only in one “brief section” of this report are voices of those who could be considered victims –relatives of those who were murdered –included (Phelps 93). Throughout the rest of the report, “the victims’ stories...are told by the writers... and become subsumed into [their] master narrative” (Phelps 93). In this sense, although the Rettig Commission’s report represents one version of the history of Chile’s period of authoritarian oppression, it cannot be considered a source of personal accounts of the violence, and therefore loses some of its legitimacy and value.

Moving beyond just the case of Chile to truth commission reports in general, it is important to recognize that they are not the most accessible, reader-friendly accounts of the past. They are very long and written in formal, official language. Thus, the average person is not likely to read them. Their content too is not the most engaging. As Eric Stener Carlson, a former member of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) honestly states, “It is impossible, I think, to relate to statistics of mass murder or suffering... We need to know the murdered woman had a family, had a boyfriend, had a career of helping people” (Monahan 40).

Truth commission reports simply do not include, or else offer only small doses of, this type of personal and relatable account of the past. This is where records in the form of artistic works become much more successful. Effectively reaching the public due to their wide variety of forms, these stories engage us, “make us a part of them,” and invite us to participate in the understanding and remembering of the experiences they represent (Scheub 14). Overall, works of art are a more accessible way to document stories of the past.

## **Conclusions**

“Post-authoritarian truth-telling is more an art than a process, more about the creativity of individuals and communities than about official hearings, testimonies, and reports generated by state institutions” (Bilbija 3). By turning to the arts to tell the stories of individual and societal traumas suffered during a period of state-sponsored oppression, one will find an experience very different from that of testifying before an official truth commission. The arts represent a wide variety of novel, alternative vocabularies for understanding, articulating, and sharing traumatic experiences. Although there can be no guarantee of what type of audience and reaction a work of art will receive, by sharing it publicly, the artist can potentially relieve some of the pain of those who have had similar experiences but are unwilling or unable to share them, and also begin important conversations about opposing truths. Furthermore, because the process of art-making and sharing is unofficial, it is completely inclusive: anyone can tell any story in any way at any time. Thus, each survivor, witness, perpetrator, etc. is empowered with the equal opportunity to tell his or her story. Finally, many forms of art can create unique records of the past that are far more relatable and participatory than official reports. It is with this understanding of the process of storytelling through the arts that one can begin to see why this form of expression ought to be recognized as a legitimate mechanism of transitional justice, albeit an alternative and unofficial

one. In “the struggle to ascertain truths after the end of authoritarian rule,” “what the arts can do... is to construct images by whatever means possible to expose the nature of tyranny, to support the struggle for freedom, and to give dignity and respect to the lives living and the lives lost” (Fair 24).

### **STORYTELLING, TRUTH COMMISSIONS, AND THE ARTS: Conclusions**

Under authoritarian rule, “the story that a victim has constructed about his or her own life” and the vision that the society as a whole once had of itself are “systematically destroyed and the oppressors’ story becomes the dominant and only narrative” (Phelps 42). Continuing to think in terms of storytelling, during the period of transition away from state-sponsored terror and abuse, the destroyed narratives of the individual survivors, witnesses, perpetrators, etc., as well as of the larger national community, must be rebuilt and retold in a way that incorporates the trauma suffered at the hands of the old regime. In this chapter, I have claimed that storytelling has the potential to play several key roles within a project of transitional justice. Under ideal circumstances, the stories told about a traumatic past will serve to condemn the abuse, preventing similar atrocities from happening in the future. The social, dialogical truth that emerges from the abundance of personal experiences shared in this time can then replace the rigid, silencing, and false master narrative previously imposed by the authoritarian leaders. By once again being in control of their personal stories, individuals will be able to regain a sense of dignity and put into practice their renewed agency, reaping therapeutic benefits from this process of narration as well. Some form of justice can also be achieved by storytelling, particularly in the restorative sense of rebalancing the power of the victim and his or her abusers. And finally, inclusive storytelling and open dialogue can ease tensions between previously opposing sectors of society, modeling the democratic and community-oriented values of the new government.

However, the capacity for storytelling to fulfill each of these potential roles depends greatly on the characteristics of the venue that facilitates the process. Thus, it is important to look critically at the mechanisms of transitional justice that incorporate storytelling.

Focusing on the periods of transition in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, I first examined the truth commissions of each of these countries, the officially-administered institutions charged with investigating the abuses of the past regimes, relying particularly on individual testimonies, and submitting final reports. Through this analysis, the benefits of using CONADEP, the Rettig Commission, and/or CEH for individual and communal storytelling quickly became apparent: victims' stories were officially welcomed and acknowledged by the new government; a report was submitted to permanently document the stories of individual survivors as well as the dark chapter in the history of the nation, and made accessible to present and future generations; and, to varying extents, the stories told before and documented by these bodies forced perpetrators to face some accountability for their actions. However, as storytelling venues, these truth commissions also had their limitations. None held public hearings, some testifiers suffered from retraumatization after experiencing the one-time catharsis of sharing their stories with the commissioners, and their strict mandates only afforded storytelling opportunities to certain individuals and for certain crimes. Thus, with so many individuals with stories to tell and such a pressing need to develop a collective memory of the period, it became clear that in each of these countries there must have been more than one storytelling venue during the moments of transition.

Did the arts offer the additional space needed to tell these stories? Thinking generally about the arts and their intrinsic connection to storytelling, this emerges as a distinct possibility. Directly addressing the destruction of both language and the survivors' ability to conventionally

articulate their traumatic experiences, the arts offer a range of alternative vocabularies. For some, dancing, painting, writing, etc. about their pain, represents a more approachable and/or suitable way of communicating. Furthermore, when this art is shared with the public –inserted into the public sphere and sometimes literally into public spaces –others (the audience, viewer, reader, etc.) are able to deal with similar painful experiences that they may have yet to reckon with themselves, healing to some degree just by knowing that they have someone to relate to. While independently-created art may never be seen or acknowledged by any government official, the fact that the storytelling that happens through the arts is unofficial actually has many benefits; it leaves the process open, allowing anyone to tell their story at any time and in whatever way he or she sees fit. Finally, like truth commission reports, many forms of art (painting, film, sculpture, etc.) will become permanent records of the stories that they hold. Unlike the official reports however, works of art are generally much more accessible to the average person, making them a very different type of resource for those attempting to cope with the traumas of the past, as well as for the generations to come as they look back and try to understand. As far as the mechanisms of transitional justice are concerned, the arts are an unconventional consideration; however, in thinking of them as an unofficial and alternative storytelling venue, one finds that they certainly have a lot to contribute to the process.

**CHAPTER 3:**  
**USING *TESTIMONIO* TO REPRESENT INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE TRAUMA**  
**IN ARGENTINA: The Case of Nora Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death***

*"When they stole my name  
 I was one I was hundreds I was thousands  
 I was no one."* – *A Single, Numberless Death*

In 1976, Nora Strejilevich, a Jewish university student, was kidnapped by the Argentine military and taken to the *Club Atlético* (Athletic Club) concentration camp where she was detained and tortured, along with hundreds of other *desaparecidos*, including her older brother, Gerardo. Upon her release in 1977, Strejilevich left the country, living in Israel, Canada, the U.S. and several other places, but returning to Argentina very frequently (Szurmuk 98). What she found on those trips back to her former home was that it had turned into a country of "I don't remember" (Strejilevich, "A Single, Numberless Death" 37). The denial, uncertainty, apathy, and silence that had been imposed and carefully cultivated during the years of the Dirty War persisted in many ways (Strejilevich, "A Single" 37). Strejilevich recalls, for example, landing at the airport on the seventeenth anniversary of the military coup of 1976 and picking up a copy of *Clarín* featuring an article that quoted former president Roberto Viola, who was still adamantly maintaining that "The coup was an unavoidable act that had the support of practically all Argentine citizens, and little opposition except from subversive elements of society' ... [and] during the years of 'The Process' there was no government terrorism" (Strejilevich, "A Single" 166). She is "shocked" by his statements, but observes that those around her exhibit no signs of "rage" (Strejilevich, "A Single" 167). She expects their "blood to boil" as they "notice the headlines and read over the article," but they simply go about their daily business (Strejilevich, "A Single" 167).

It is within this context that Strejilevich decided that the story –or, more accurately, the many stories –of the Dirty War and its legacy desperately needed to be (re)constructed and shared. Thus, in 1997 she published the *testimonio*, *Una sola muerte numerosa*, later translated into English as *A Single, Numberless Death*. Through this unique piece of literature, Strejilevich “chronicles human rights abuses committed during Argentina’s last military dictatorship (1976-1983),” focusing “not only on the horror of the death camps, but also the turbulent experience of protest marches, exile, the difficulty in attaining political asylum, and the outrageous bureaucratic process of collecting reparations” (Breckenridge 42). In this chapter, I will examine the form of the *testimonio* as a means of storytelling through the arts in a transitional post-authoritarian society, exploring what features make it such an apt medium for this process. Turning first to a brief discussion of the genre in general and then to a more in-depth study of Strejilevich’s *A Single Numberless Death* within the Argentine context, I will make a case for the power of this literary form of storytelling.

### **Understanding *Testimonio***

“The word *testimonio* translates literally as testimony, as in the act of testifying or bearing witness in a legal or religious sense” (Beverley 14). Forming as a “new narrative genre in the 1960s,” *testimonio* “has enjoyed an especially rich development” in Latin America (Beverley 13). An important resource for understanding the genre of *testimonio* is John Beverley’s article, “The Margin at the Center: On Testimonio (Testimonial Narrative).” There, he points out several important characteristics that distinguish this literary movement. According to Beverley, *testimonio* can be defined most basically as

...a novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet (that is, printed as opposed to acoustic) form, told in first person by a narrator who is also the real



protagonist or witness of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is usually a 'life' or a significant life experience. (13)

In terms of subject matter, *testimonio* are narratives that “involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival, and so on” (Beverley 14). In other words, the works of this genre communicate social problems and injustices as experienced first-hand by their author-narrator.

Perhaps one of the most important characteristics of the *testimonio* is that, although narrated in the first person singular, it is meant to represent the similar or shared experiences of a larger group to which the author-narrator belongs. Thus, the first-person “I” that speaks in the *testimonio* represents not only the individual narrator him or herself, but also “speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group” (Beverley 16). In this sense, “each individual *testimonio* evokes an absent polyphony of other voices, other possible lives and experiences” (Beverley 16). In one of the most widely recognized *testimonios* of Latin America, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* (translated as *I, Rigoberta Menchú*), Rigoberta Menchú Tum directly addresses this intention, stating, “The important thing is that what has happened to me has happened to many other people also: My story is the story of all poor Guatemalans. My personal experience is the reality of a whole people” (1). As a marginalized and oppressed individual, the narrator of a *testimonio* is often “functionally illiterate or, if literate, not a professional writer,” and therefore may enlist the help of an “interlocutor who is an intellectual, often a journalist or a writer” to create the publishable written text based on his or her testimony

(Beverley 15). Due to this fact, “the production of a *testimonio* generally involves tape recording and then transcription and editing of an oral account” (Beverley 15).<sup>6</sup>

These characteristics of the narration and production of *testimonio* are at once potential sources of both the strength and the danger of using this form as a means of storytelling. While the inclusion that comes from narrating in a way that is meant to incorporate and honor the experiences of others is potentially beneficial for those who cannot or will not tell their personal version of this story for whatever reason, it should also be viewed skeptically, as some who are meant to be included may feel that the author-narrator does not accurately represent their experience. Furthermore, the use of an interlocutor can be seen both as an effective and necessary collaboration for the elevation of marginalized voices, yet also as a complicating factor, calling into question the true author of the *testimonio*. It is important to address these tensions and to have them in mind when evaluating Strejilevich’s work as a means of storytelling. One must ask, *Whom does Strejilevich claim to represent through her testimonio? How does she do this? Is it effective? Is Strejilevich the only author of the work?*

A final aspect of *testimonio* that I would like to address before moving onto the analysis of *A Single, Numberless Death* is the question of why individuals have turned to this form in the first place. In her article on testimony, Strejilevich explains that one of the functions of giving testimony –in this case, through *testimonio* –is that it serves as “a means for working through traumatic memories” (“Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth” 701). Creating a *testimonio* is a process that allows the narrator to make sense of his or her experience and also to assign a meaningful purpose to this and others’ “suffering,” as it will assume a role in the creation of historical memory once published and shared (Strejilevich, “Testimony” 702). Strejilevich also

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<sup>6</sup> While this does not apply to Strejilevich personally, she acted as interlocutor and used this process in gathering testimony from others.

argues that, “testimony is not only a means for working through but, also a means for social and cultural resistance, which is necessary for the ethical recovery of community” (“Testimony” 707). Thus, *testimonio* also speaks out against the situations it recounts. In this way, *testimonio* is a form that is written for the benefit of the narrator as well as for his or her society.

### **Representing Trauma: A Matter of Structure**

In analyzing *A Single, Numberless Death* the form and structure of the novel must be given equal attention to the content. As I have explained, this work falls within the genre of *testimonio*, a type of literature that by definition is meant to respond to unjust social situations like the one that Strejilevich experienced in Argentina. For Strejilevich, the focus of this work is to convey “the personal experience of state violence” –what it means and how it feels to live through and in the aftermath of the individual and collective trauma of the dark period of the Dirty War (Szurmuk 100). In order to achieve this most effectively, Strejilevich makes several stylistic decisions that allow the structure of the novel to reinforce and communicate the same messages, ideas, and sensations she aims to transmit through its content. In this section, I will call attention to some of these techniques, examining how they enable Strejilevich to authentically represent the experience and memory of trauma.

As I have touched upon previously, traumatic experiences are remembered in fragments, not in complete organized narratives. The survivor of trauma is simply “incapable of exhibiting all the horror” he or she has experienced, and can offer only glimpses or snapshots of the incident (Strejilevich, “Testimony” 707). Thus, as Strejilevich herself explains in an essay entitled, “Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth,” “a truthful way of giving testimony should allow for disruptive moments, discontinuities, blanks, silences, and ambiguities” (704). And she goes on to state, “the way to create an account of this sort is to piece together the

fragments, the ruins of spared recollections in order to produce some meaning” (Strejilevich, “Testimony” 710). *A Single, Numberless Death* represents this type of truthful and appropriate storytelling space, mimicking the fragmentation that is inherent in the memory of the gruesome events it recounts. As I will describe in more detail in the following section of this chapter, (which focuses on an analysis of the book’s content), Strejilevich pulls from various sources –her own first person narration, the recorded testimony of other survivors, newspapers, the CONADEP report, other literary works, etc. –in order to construct a narrative account of the Dirty War and its legacy. In this way, any one event, feeling, and/or idea that she presents in this *testimonio* is constructed from several fragments that are woven together. When considered as a whole, these segments work together, telling the story in a cohesive way. However, Strejilevich also calls attention to the fact that they are distinct pieces by the way in which she formats the text. The reader quickly comes to realize that, for example, the italicized sections are testimony that the author has gathered from other survivors, and the indented, tightly spaced blocks of text are quotations from some official source. In this way, Strejilevich is able to remain true to and communicate the feeling of a fragmented remembering of trauma while creating an accessible and comprehensible narrative at the same time.

Strejilevich further maintains this feeling of fragmentation, while adding an element of uncertainty and discomfort (also important sensations, especially for the representation and understanding of the families of the disappeared), by purposefully not resolving or giving concrete ending to the stories that make up the *testimonio*. As Janis Breckenridge explains in her article, “Taking a Stand: Examining the Testimonial Process in Nora Strejilevich’s ‘*Una sola muerte numerosa*,’”

... [The] unfinished nature, whereby each unique story remains only partially transmitted, leaves the reader wondering how they survived to tell their tale. With the exception of Nora and her desperate search to learn her brother's final destiny, the book makes no attempt to relate the complete trajectory of the Argentine situation for, as the Mothers' continued ritual Thursday march reminds us, the actual fate of Argentina's disappeared remains undisclosed. (43)

In other words, simply by choosing to include pieces of –rather than whole –stories, Strejilevich is able to convey to her readers this feeling of uncertainty that was so much a part of living during the Dirty War and persists in its aftermath for the many who still wonder what happened to their disappeared loved ones.

Another important aspect of the structure of this novel is its circular nature. Breckenridge points this out in her article as she addresses the final section of the *testimonio*. In this “scene” Strejilevich “participates in a demonstration held at the former site of *Club Atlético*,” marking the anniversary of the military coup that started it all by reading excerpts from the “manuscript” of *A Single, Numberless Death* “at the precise location of her torture” to an audience of fellow survivors (Breckenridge 47). “A certain perverse magic turns the key to the front door...” she reads –the same words that begin her narration in the first pages of the book (Strejilevich, “A Single” 171). “In this way the culminating scene represents a return to the beginning,” explains Breckenridge, “a circular structure that suggests the tale will undergo countless recitations and revisions” (48). This idea that the trauma narrative will be retold and change over time is very important as it suggests that the act of bearing witness and remembering is an active process that requires ongoing attention. Indeed, there is explicit proof within the text that this is Strejilevich's own aim and understanding of her book. She narrates, “I came back, Gerardo, to tie up the loose

ends of our story into a knot that might undo the uncertainty... To turn you into a book whose ending... is open and subject to change” (Strejilevich, “A Single” 152).

In addition to Breckenridge’s observation of how Strejilevich’s speech serves as a reference to the beginning of the book, I would like to mention that its final sentence makes an important allusion to the novel’s epigraph, reinforcing this circular structure. Strejilevich concludes the novel with this reflection regarding her reading at the demonstration: “Words are written so my voice can pronounce them here, in this place that is neither dust nor cell but a chorus of voices resisting armed monologues that turned so much life into a single, numberless death” (171). This last sentence borrows or repeats the words of Tomás Eloy Martínez that begin the book<sup>7</sup>. This phrase, *a single, numberless death*, no doubt stands out to the reader as it also serves as the novel’s title; thus, the connection between the first and last page of the work is quite explicit: not only inviting, but demanding that the reader reflect on why this circular structure has been employed.

The use of poetry and poetic language also shape the structure of the work. Literature, and particularly poetry, is very important to Strejilevich as a survivor of trauma. Testimony of such experiences, she explains, “should become literary,” as “a poetic voice might be needed to tell the story” (Strejilevich, “Testimony” 704). In her own experience of coping with torture, exile, and her brother’s disappearance, poetry served as a vital means of communication.

Around... ’77 or ’78, I started producing poetry although I had never been a big reader of poetry and I don’t consider myself a poet. Maybe it was my way of extracting sense out of words since the meanings words had before had been lost.

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<sup>7</sup> “From 1975 on, my entire country metamorphosed into a single, numberless death. At first this seemed intolerable, but later it was accepted with indifference and even relegated to oblivion” (Strejilevich, “A Single”).

Poetry allowed me to draw with words, play in a world which at that point was absurd and meaningless. (Szurmuk 98)

In *A Single, Numberless Death*, Strejilevich continues to use poetry, as well as a poetic voice in her prose narration, naturally slipping into this more artistic means of expression whenever necessary for communication. For example, in describing her mother's death, she begins in prose and gradually breaks down into poetry:

I play spectator, since I have no strength to challenge Papa. He opens the door and  
three smocks lift you, submissive, defeated, huddled in your chair / beaten,  
overpowered, they drag you / the ambulance screeching time / we arrive, the  
stretcher, those eyes, don't pierce me with those eyes...

*That was yesterday. Today  
your hand no longer speaks to me  
and I stroke the womb of your absence  
that began just a quiver ago...*

(Strejilevich, "A Single" 138)

As I suggested in the previous chapter, language is something with which survivors of trauma – personal trauma, but particularly that which is part of a larger societal traumatic experience – struggle. Thus, by using poetry, Strejilevich is able to employ a form of storytelling that relies heavily on language (*testimonio*), while still allowing room to communicate in an alternative artistic way. This is key, as the representation of trauma as a cohesive straightforward recounting of the experience may not be possible and/or feel authentic for many survivors.

### Considering Content: The Importance of Including Multiple Voices, Sources

While a great deal of meaning can be taken from *A Single, Numberless Death* simply by analyzing its form and structure, fully understanding and appreciating this means of storytelling through the arts also requires consideration of its content. As I alluded to in my explanation of the novel's fragmented structure, this *testimonio* is truly polyphonic, not just evoking the idea that Strejilevich's story is shared by many others, but rather giving them space to speak for themselves. In this way, the novel "is an autobiographical account of Nora's experience" and at the same time "a collection of other voices," coming together to "provide a rich array of narratives which give testimony to the horror of state terrorism" (Szurmuk 98). Perhaps the most important voices we hear from besides Strejilevich's own are those of her fellow survivors and the family members of victims—"former prisoners, former disappeared, families of the disappeared, activists, friends of [her] brother and cousins who are still missing, and people who just happened to live there at that particular time" (Strejilevich, "Testimony" 711). By including the experiences and words of these others, "Strejilevich complicates her personal tale" (Breckenridge 42). However, it is important to note that, for her, this so-called "complication" is not a burden nor something she felt obligated to do; rather she came to realize that she needed to hear these stories in order to fully understand her own experiences. Explained in her own words:

After my detention in the so-called "Athletic Club" in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I was only certain that living under State Terror had questioned everything I had learned and thought up until then, and that in spite of having been immersed in its cruelest version, I was unaware of how the death factory really functioned. I needed to hear other stories coming from the same place in order to complete my own. This is why, after narrating in my own poetic voice, I went back to



Argentina in the nineties determined to hear and record other voices...

(Strejilevich, "Testimony" 711).

She recognizes and thanks those who contributed to this process in the dedication of the book (Breckenridge 44). Yet, this inclusion of other voices served not only to benefit Strejilevich personally; it also surely had an impact on those individuals who were able to tell her their stories and see them published in this *testimonio*.

For the reader too, it is both meaningful and helpful to have an account of the Dirty War that draws from a "collection of different perspectives on the same, collective history" (Strejilevich, "Testimony" 711). To see that countless individuals have such similar stories to share gives the text legitimacy and credibility, which is very important when trying to communicate experiences that are often regarded as "unimaginable" by outsiders. Another aspect that strengthens the novel in this same way is the inclusion of the voice of not just the victim but also of the perpetrator. While *A Single, Numberless Death* focuses mainly on the perspective of the survivors, Strejilevich does provide a space for those who committed the crimes of the Dirty War to speak for themselves as well. One way in which she does this is through the use of excerpts from Horacio Verbitsky's testimony, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*. Another is through the quotation of official statements such as, "In order for Argentina to achieve internal security, as many people as necessary will have to die," a declaration made by General Rafael Videla, the head of the military junta (Strejilevich, "A Single" 6). In this way, Strejilevich demonstrates a degree of objectivity, acknowledging that the statements and accounts of perpetrators –whether we like them or not –need to be a part of a full understanding of this period.

Beyond, or perhaps as a result of, Strejilevich's use of such a multitude of voices within her *testimonio*, she also includes a great variety of sources. She employs a mixture of her own narration, "intercalated oral testimony," pieces from "official public discourses (as represented in communiqués, public statements and documents, bureaucratic forms, academic treatises, and newspaper articles)," as well as selections from "private discourses (as related in poems, journal entries, and personal letters)" (Breckenridge 43). This adds to the reader's sense that he or she is getting a very broad and full picture of the experience of the Dirty War through this one *testimonio*. At the same time though, the juxtapositions and discrepancies that become evident when comparing some of these accounts, particularly the official to the unofficial or private ones, speaks to the fact that some sources should be read as more authentic and/or reliable than others. For example, Breckenridge alerts us to one of these important contrasts within Strejilevich's account of hearing her brother's torture. In this section of the book, Strejilevich quotes her own quotation in *Nunca Más*<sup>8</sup>, which describes this experience in the following manner: "During the interrogation session I could hear the screams of my brother and his girlfriend, whose voices I could make out perfectly. In addition, the torturers referred to a scar that both of us –my brother and I –have on our backs, which confirmed my presence there" (Strejilevich, "A Single" 30). This is "a flat account that stands in stark contrast to her profoundly personal and infinitely more powerful poetic representation" that comes from her unofficial narration of the memory (Breckenridge 44). There, she includes descriptive phrases such as "His moans rip me apart, tear me into countless shreds," and "I bite my tongue to keep from exploding" (Strejilevich, "A Single" 30). Thus, these two accounts (one official and one unofficial), both from the same person (Strejilevich) and of the same event, serve to demonstrate that storytelling can take many

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<sup>8</sup> Recall that *Nunca Más* is the report of Argentina's official truth commission, CONADEP.

forms, but that –in this and many other cases –the unofficial, personal one is certainly more poignant.

At other times, the juxtaposition between sources –again between one that is official and one that is private –represents contradicting information and points of view. For example, in a statement “given before the court where the case of the Athletic Club [was] being heard,” Juan de Luca, Federal Police Inspector states “that the place was used exclusively for administrative functions appropriate to the Warehouse Division of the Federal Police force,” that “detainees were [never] held or transferred there,” that “this division was [never] under the control of the armed forces,” and so on (Strejilevich, “A Single” 84). Strejilevich includes this official account of what happened at the *Club Atlético* from the perspective of an employee of the state without qualifying it as either true or false. She does, however, surround it (and other official statements like it) with a book full of opposing explanations of the activities there, which come from the unofficial testimony of herself and her fellow survivors. Thus, it is up to the reader to decide or infer whether the *Club Atlético* was simply an everyday police headquarters as the official accounts want us to believe, or a concentration camp where Strejilevich and countless others were detained and brutally tortured. In this way, *A Single, Numberless Death* allows the reader to arrive at a fuller understanding of the Argentine situation by exposing him or her to pieces of both the junta’s official master narrative and the personal testimony of its victims, requiring that he or she distinguish between what is true and what is not.

The final point I would like to make about the content of this *testimonio*, with its multiplicity of voices and sources, is that it can truly be read as both a collective and a personal, individual story. As Breckenridge explains, *A Single, Numberless Death*, is able to “personalize a tragic historical epoch through the collection of individualized stories –personal recollections

that in their very repetitions and similarities speak to the collective nature of these singular experiences” (46). In this sense, Strejilevich’s *testimonio* is a uniquely multifaceted mode of storytelling about authoritarianism and its legacy. To begin, it is a personal tool for healing, a means of working through trauma for her and those whom she interviewed. What's more, it is a mode of communication, an effective teaching device that contains the personal story, or stories, needed to engage the reader and evoke an empathetic response, while still providing a larger context of the period.

## Conclusions

Through *A Single, Numberless Death*, Nora Strejilevich shares her vision of Argentina’s devastating Dirty War and its legacy. Her choice of *testimonio*, a genre that is known to be contested and polyphonic in nature, speaks to the type of final product she aimed to create. Indeed, in the book, the old, false master narrative of the junta and a “chorus of voices” of its victims comingle, or perhaps collide, forming a social, dialogical truth of the period that can be interpreted in countless ways (Strejilevich, “A Single” 171). Strejilevich does not purport to speak for others, she does not even attempt to; nor does she seem to believe it is possible to construct The Story –some singular, unchanging, and perfectly representative narrative –of such a horrific episode in the history of her country and the lives of its citizens. In this chapter, I argue that Strejilevich uses both the structure and content of this *testimonio* to express herself and to communicate with her readers. She authentically represents and successfully conveys the experience of remembering traumatic events through the structure of the book, particularly its fragmentation, unresolved stories, circular narrative, and poetry. Furthermore, by carefully constructing this *testimonio* from a multitude of voices drawn from various sources, Strejilevich demonstrates that a representation of this period of massive trauma, and even her own personal

experiences, is incomplete without the inclusion, or at least consideration, of multiple and often conflicting perspectives. As a whole, her book is a space where she and other victims were able to work through and understand their own experiences, while also producing a story that is engaging for a reader. In this way, Strejilevich's *testimonio* encompasses and clearly demonstrates the personal and societal benefits that come from turning to the arts as a means of storytelling in a time when thousands of individuals are attempting to heal and a society is sorting out the many "truths" of what has occurred.

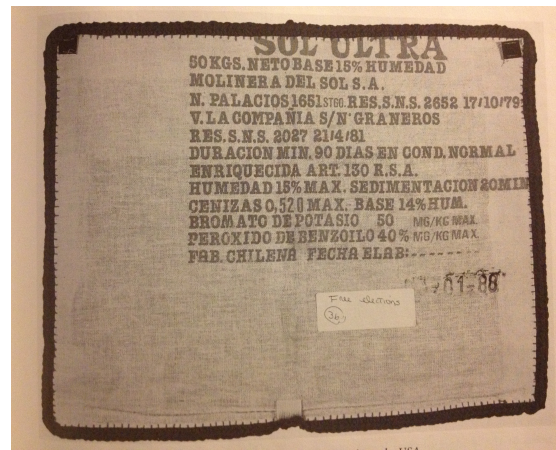
## CHAPTER 4: RESISTANCE AND HOPE IN CHILE'S *ARPILLERA* MOVEMENT

*“There is no doubt that the arpilleras, the vision of the world as seen by these women, will be one of the most important testimonies left of this dark epoch of Chilean history”*  
– Marjorie Agosín<sup>9</sup>

The military dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet (1973-89) created a “climate of suspicion and fear,” which endured long after his fall from power (Moya-Raggio 277). The years of repression, silence, disappearances and other unimaginable abuses of “subversives” could neither be easily forgotten nor remembered by those individuals directly affected and as part of a larger Chilean national history and identity. It is within these parallel contexts of tension –that of speaking out versus staying safe during the dictatorship, and of remembering versus forgetting in coping with its legacy –that this second case study emerges. In this chapter, I will explore an artistic movement that began during the years of authoritarian rule, persisted throughout the transitional period, and still exists in some form to this day. This is the *arpillera* movement.



**Fig. 1** Arpillera carrying the message, “Paz, Justicia, y Libertad” (Peace, Justice, and Liberty). Photo by Colin Peck



**Fig. 2** The back of an arpillera: burlap from sacks brought to Chile from the United States (Agosín 11)

<sup>9</sup> *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (24)

**Background: What is an *arpillera*? Who are the *arpilleristas*?**

The story of the *arpilleras* begins in the mid-1970s, at the beginnings of Pinochet's rule. In response to the abuses being committed by the military junta, a group of leaders in the Catholic Church established The Pro Paz (For Peace) Committee in 1974 with "the immediate objective of lending support to those whose human rights had been violated" in some way by the state (Agosín 7). Pro Paz, soon replaced by a similar institution called the Vicariate of Solidarity in 1976, provided an array of services for those in need, including the recruitment of lawyers to "conduct legal inquiries and searches" on behalf of the families of the disappeared, setting up soup kitchens, distributing "items of basic need," and "providing work for the indigent at the minimum wage" (Agosín 7-9). The Vicariate of Solidarity had twenty regional offices throughout the country, aiding more than 700,000 individuals in the first months of its existence (Agosín 9). Through handicraft workshops organized by the Vicariate, the *arpillera* movement came into being. As part of its commitment to providing work opportunities for the indigent, the Vicariate held these and other workshops and established "craft shops" throughout Chile to sell their clients' work (Agosín 10). Of course, before delving deeper into this history of the *arpillera* workshops, it is essential to understand what exactly an *arpillera* is.



**Fig. 3** An arpillera made by Veronica de Negri, depicting the murder of her son, Rodrigo Rojas. This piece commemorates the burning of Rodrigo and his friend, Carmen Gloria Quintana, who survived but was badly disfigured (Agosín 64).



**Fig. 4** This arpillera, made by Violeta Morales in the early 1970s, contains a photograph of her disappeared brother, Newton. Protestors depicted in this scene carry a sign demanding, “Verdad y justicia para los detenidos desaparecidos” (Truth and justice for the detained-disappeared) (Agosín 43).

To begin with the most basic of explanations, *arpilleras* are small cloth tapestries (See Fig. 1, 3, and 4). Translated into English, the word *arpillera* means burlap, taking its name from the material used as its backing (See Fig. 2); however, in Spanish it has taken the meaning, “cloth of resistance” (Agosín 10). “*Arpilleras* are made out of pieces of material combined and juxtaposed to depict scenes ranging from the most simple and basic to the most elaborate and complex” (Moya-Raggio 278). The *arpilleras* contain scenes demonstrating “the brutality of the dictatorship” (kidnapping, torture, death) and “the hardship of daily life” (protests, food shortages, unemployment) –some portrayed quite literally and others more symbolically (See Fig. 3 and 4) (Walker). “Recent *arpilleras* also illustrate the constant search for the dead,” which continues even today (Agosín 17). Thus, although vibrant and cheerful colors are used to visually narrate these scenes of the personal lives of the *arpilleristas* (the makers of the arpilleras) as well as of important events in the country, the *arpilleras* represent stories of pain, loss, and abuse. The Vicariate did its best to provide the cloth, yarn, thread, and other supplies needed for the pieces,



however the *arpilleristas* would also supplement this with material from their own clothing and “sometimes... hair from [their] own heads” (Agosín 23). It is common for the *arpilleras* to incorporate actual photographs of disappeared relatives of the *arpilleristas* (See Fig. 4), and they sometimes “carry a written message in a little pocket sewn to the cloth” (Agosín 43, 28).

Another important aspect of the *arpilleras* is that they are made by women. When the Vicariate established the *arpillera* workshops in March of 1974, their goal was to give women whose husbands were either unemployed or detained-disappeared an opportunity to support themselves and their families through the making and selling of these tapestries (Agosín 8). Many of these women “had never worked outside the home before;” thus, in order to facilitate the process, the Vicariate took on the responsibilities of “finding a place to meet, providing the supplies..., and buying the finished *arpilleras* and selling them abroad” (Agosín 8, Walker). “The workshops typically consisted of about twenty women meeting several times a week in a church building... About 80 percent of the participants were poor or working-class, while the rest came from middle-class backgrounds” (Walker). At first, women joined the workshops purely out of economic need; but, as time went on, the act of *arpillera*-making and involvement in the group began to supply much more than just income for the participants (Walker).



**Fig. 5** *Violeta Morales, an arpillerista. Photo by Paz Errázuriz*

Violeta Morales, one of the first women to become involved in the *arpillera* movement, tells her personal story and offers an insider's perspective of the workshops in Marjorie Agosín's *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile 1974-1994* (See Fig. 5). Her testimony serves as an exemplary illustration of the types of circumstances and sentiments shared by the larger group of *arpilleristas*, which she helped to organize. On August 13<sup>th</sup>, 1974 Violeta's brother, Newton Morales, was disappeared. As a former officer in the Chilean navy and the head of the union at the Sumar plant, "we in the family knew that [the government would be] looking for him," explains Violeta (Agosín 99-100). Three men claiming to be coworkers of Newton's "arrived in the night" and "took him by the arms" into a "red station wagon," assuring his mother not to worry; "We'll bring him back in ten minutes –we only want to speak with him," they told her (Agosín 101). When Newton did not return, Violeta and her family "began looking for him everywhere" (Agosín 102). Not only was Violeta devastated emotionally by her brother's disappearance, but she had also depended on him financially. "At the time, I was alone with my five children. My husband had left me... and Newton supported and helped all of us," explains Violeta (Agosín 100). She turned to the Pro-Paz Committee for help in her search for her brother. There, she also found a group of women –fellow mothers, daughters, sisters of the detained-disappeared –who too were frantically searching for their loved ones and struggling to live without them. This group of women, inspired by "the embroiderers of Macul and the works of Violeta Parra," decided to make *arpilleras* as a means of "tell[ing] about [their] personal experiences" as family members of the detained-disappeared<sup>10</sup>, while also supporting themselves financially (Agosín 104). Violeta

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<sup>10</sup> Fig. 4 shows one of the many *arpilleras* that Violeta created in memory of her missing brother. This image evokes a personal story through the picture of Newton, while also acknowledging – and demonstrating solidarity among –all family members of Chile's detained-disappeared.

eventually became a volunteer teacher and organizer of the Vicariate's *arpillera* and other workshops for women ("laundry, rabbit breeding, sewing," etc.) (Agosín 107). In these times, "it seemed as if the world had turned its back on us. There were no politicians, union leaders, or anyone on earth who could help us organize and give us ideas about how to survive the tragedy," says Violeta (Agosín 109). For her, the *arpillera* workshops were a way to fill this void, a means of helping herself and other women to endure the difficult period of the dictatorship.

### **Surviving and Communicating Authoritarianism and Its Legacy**

After joining the *arpillera* workshops as a means of "day-to-day survival," in the economic sense, the *arpilleristas* quickly found that the act of storytelling by way of the tapestries proved essential to the survival of the human spirit both during the dictatorship and in its aftermath (Walker). As I have discussed previously, storytelling under and after abusive authoritarian rule acts as a means of healing for individuals, allowing them to process the trauma and to have that experience acknowledged by others. The women certainly came to see their narration through the *arpilleras* in this way. As one of the *arpilleristas* explains,

The *arpilleras* were a beautiful kind of therapy for me. The first one I made showed the disappearance of my son; it took me a month because every doll I made had something so despairing about it. I lived alone, coming back to my house to sew and to weep, which caused me great suffering. To relieve my anguish I made my *arpilleras*." (Agosín 17)

Valentina Bonne, a teacher of many of the *arpillera* workshops, echoes this sentiment, stating that, in her observation of the women, the work "afforded happiness, provided relief—happiness to see that they were capable of creating their own testimony, relief simply by ...being able to show that through this visual record others would know their story" (Agosín 115). Both of these

quotations from women with firsthand experiences with *arpillera*-making, clearly demonstrate that this art form affords an effective space that allows individuals to heal through storytelling.

But what exactly makes the *arpilleras* such an apt form of storytelling for these women? First of all, *arpilleras* allow the women to “speak through a skill traditionally considered feminine, the use of needle and thread” (Moya-Raggio 279). In other words, the tapestry medium is familiar and accessible for women in this traditional society. Furthermore, narration, of both personal and collective histories, is often attributed to the woman. As Isabel Allende, a celebrated Chilean writer, explains “most women are natural weavers of stories, not only those who have the good fortune to be published, but all those who perpetuate the oral tradition – mother, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers...” (Agosin xi). The *arpilleristas* are just that, mothers, wives, sisters of the disappeared, all looking for a way to survive and to communicate their anguish during and after the brutal dictatorship.

Beyond these basic explanations of the suitability of *arpilleras* as a means of storytelling for Chilean women in these times, it is perhaps more essential that I recognize and explore how these tapestries provide an alternative language for documenting personal and national histories, responding to current events, and dreaming of the future. The *arpillerista* “does not use words because words have been denied her” by the fear and silence that mark the national climate (Moya-Raggio 278). Conventional forms of narration, particularly writing, would not serve the women in the way that the *arpilleras* have. As Irma Muller, “mother of the detained-disappeared Jorge Muller Silva,” expresses,

After living so many years in a dictatorship and having suffered during all those years the disappearances of a loved one, one almost forgets how to write. There are so many thoughts of pain, of anguish, or rage and impotence... I don't know

where to begin to say all that has happened to me since they arrested my son and made him disappear. I don't believe there is enough paper in the world to tell what those years have been like. (Agosín 122)

The *arpilleras* employ a visual vocabulary, offering to the women a new way of thinking about and representing the stories that “could not be told in words” (Agosín xii). Throughout her book, Agosín describes the language of the *arpilleras* as one of “love,” “poetry,” “color,” and “emotion” (14, 27). The *arpilleristas* undoubtedly recognize and appreciate the unique storytelling process this art form affords them, knowing that no other medium allows them to communicate their stories in quite the same, effective way.

### **“Cloth of Resistance”: Protest through Storytelling**

The *arpilleras*’ alternative language not only facilitates individual healing; this powerful mode of communication through the arts also denounces and challenges the injustices seen and experienced by the *arpilleristas* during and after the dictatorship. “The *arpilleras* were born into a desolate and muffled period in Chilean culture... yet [they] flourished in the midst of a silent nation... represent[ing] the only dissident voices existing in a society obligated to silence” (Agosín 12). While the junta arrested, tortured, and disappeared thousands of men who spoke out against them, “no matter what the women did, [they] could not permit themselves to validate the work being done by women by taking them seriously” (Agosín 19). Thus, it was only a matter of time before the women began to understand “their own privileged female position under the regime” and “to take astute advantage of it” (Agosín 20). “Insist[ing] that the men stay home so as to avoid arrest, exile, or torture,” the women, relatively safe due to their gender, chose to speak out against the regime by means of their *arpilleras*.

The *arpilleristas* challenged Pinochet's regime as well as any efforts to forget its crimes in a number of ways. To begin, the women used the *arpilleras* to confront the guilty junta, breaking the silence surrounding their actions. "'We are here to denounce what happened to us and to put our anguish into the *arpilleras* so that others will know,'" explains one of the *arpilleristas* during a workshop (Agosín 14). Another, Anita Rojas, elaborates, "We denounce other problems, not just our own: unemployment, the massacre of Lonquén, ...children begging"; "We want people living outside of Chile to see how we live here" (Agosín 121). These quotations illustrate the scope of the issues covered by the *arpilleristas*, including both the personal and the collective, and their desire to make their stories known within the country and abroad. In this way, "the *arpilleristas* are... both witnesses and accusers," narrating what they have seen and experienced in their beautiful yet devastating *arpilleras* in order to use the tapestries as "nonviolent, yet denunciatory weapons" against the regime that has caused them and their country so much pain as well as against the silence that has protected the guilty for so long (Agosín 26-27).

As I have discussed in previous chapters, authoritarian regimes tend to impose a false master narrative in order to explain and justify their actions with the hopes that it will remain the official account of that chapter in the nation's history. However, when thousands of voices speak out with other versions of what has happened and/or is happening, the imposed, rigid narrative begins to shatter. In Chile, the *arpilleristas* represent a sector of these contesting voices, inserting their stories –creating a national dialogue, and influencing the construction of the historical memory of the period during Pinochet's rule. Through their *arpilleras* the women refuse to accept and perpetuate "an official history that justified violating human rights and suspending civil liberties, banning political parties and prohibiting meetings and demonstrations" (Agosín

139). As Agosín explains, the *arpilleras* are “the vision of the world as seen by these women;” representing what really happened to them as individuals and to their country during those years (24). Thus, not only do the *arpilleristas* “gather from the most intimate and private of places” their personal stories of grief and of loss, they also use their art to “describe emblematic events in the life of a nation” that affect all Chileans (Agosín 94, 12). In this sense, “for the *arpilleristas*, the political events of the country and their daily lives became inseparable. Through their art, they represented their world: empty homes and children looking for their parents,” which was also the world of so many of their countrymen (Agosín 24). In this way, the creation and dissemination of the *arpilleristas*’ versions of the stories, both theirs and their country’s, are a form of protest, countering the imposition of false, official histories during and after the dictatorship.

Finally, the *arpilleristas* denounced the regime and continue to fight to preserve the memory of its heinous crimes by using their *arpilleras* to honor the dead and disappeared. “The women always made *arpilleras* on the anniversary of the abductions to commemorate the lives of those lost,” explains Agosín (13). It is their “profound concern to keep alive the memory of the loved one and to recover it in the making of the *arpillera*” (Agosín 28). It is through this process of *arpillera*-making and in the final products that the *arpilleristas* “affirm the validity of existence and the sanctity of human life” that the repressive regime so harshly challenged through disappearances and torture (Agosín 28). While many attempted to turn a blind eye and now try to forget, the *arpilleristas* cannot and will not. These women have lost so much that they “will mourn forever” (Agosín 32). But there is more to their continued *arpillera*-making than an outlet for grief; the women use the tapestries to demand justice. Agosín explains, “They tell me they don’t want vengeance, that they don’t want reprisals, either, but rather some type of public

acknowledgement that their husbands, fathers, and children were not criminals or thieves but that they were human beings” (32). Furthermore, “reconciliation without justice and acknowledgement is a price the *arpilleristas* cannot accept” (Agosín 38). Thus, the *arpilleristas* continue to search for and tell the stories of their disappeared loved ones, and in doing so denounce the crimes and regime that took them away, as well as combat the lack of acknowledgement that has continued years later.

### **Beyond the Cloth: Further Impacts of the *Arpillera* Workshops**

While I have argued that the *arpilleras* themselves provide a useful healing tool, an alternative language for storytelling, and a creative means of denouncing the regime and its impunity, the experience of making of these tapestries –particularly of being a member of the workshops –also needs to be recognized as having had its own significant impacts on the *arpilleristas* and on Chilean society. In this final session, I will explore several ways in which the *arpillera* workshops facilitated and inspired further efforts and new ways of thinking among the women. This includes political participation, the creation of a folk group, and preparation for the future more democratic Chile.



**Fig. 6** This arpillera, entitled *Encadenamiento: Chaining*, depicts the weekly demonstrations staged by the *arpilleristas*. The chains they wear are symbols of the painful years of searching for disappeared loved ones (Agosín 42).



**Fig. 7** The first arpillera made representing *la cueca sola*, sewn by Gala Torres in 1988 to denounce the disappearance of her brother (Agosín 75).



Although “the military [junta] envisioned women as being politically passive and uninvolved...outside of the house, its economic policies and political structures had the opposite effect” (Walker). As I have explained previously, under the dictatorship, women were forced to enter into the public sphere more and more (especially to find work) due to the unemployment or absence of their husbands, fathers, and brothers. While this was a positive phenomenon for women and for the progress of Chilean society, these policies, which had the unintended consequence of empowering women, proved to be self-destructive regulations on the part of Pinochet’s regime. An excellent illustration of this point comes from examining how the *arpillera* workshops “transformed... from a way of earning money to a social movement” (Walker). One of the most important pieces of this transformation is the bond that formed among the *arpilleristas*. Through the course of their weekly meetings, during which they shared highly personal and emotional stories, the *arpilleristas* became much more than coworkers; they formed a community, a social network, vital to their survival in so many ways. As Agosín describes it, the *arpilleristas* were “united in an alliance of sisterhood” (10). Another essential element of this metamorphosis of the workshops from an initial place to earn a living into the center of political activity is the change they brought about in the women themselves. One *arpillerista* explains, “With this work I learned to grow as a person, to have an opinion, to criticize, to understand” (Agosín 25). Thus, already recognizing their work with the *arpilleras* as a form of protest in and of itself, and having gained a new confidence and sense of agency from working outside the home in a united group of women, the *arpilleristas* developed a social conscience and “became involved in political protest activities beyond” the workshops (Walker). As one of the women explains, “The fact that we meet here in the [*arpillera*] workshop is very important because we give each other courage to go out in the street together” (Walker). The *arpilleristas* participated

in hunger strikes and “chained themselves to fences in strategic locations in downtown Santiago, such as the Supreme Court, the door of Pinochet’s house, and the old Casa del Gobierno,” all in an effort to “call attention to the junta’s practice of torturing and disappearing people” and to “force out the truth of what had happened to missing members of their families” (See Fig. 6) (Agosín 21). “In this sense, the workshops themselves served as mobilizing structures or movement centers; women started out in the workshops and moved on to become involved in other forms of protest” (Walker). In terms of storytelling, this level of political activity among the *arpilleristas* is an important demonstration of the ripple effects that can come from empowerment through the process of narration through the arts.

The creation of the *arpillerista* folk group, in 1983, represents another interesting effort that resulted from the women’s own empowerment and motivation to continue their political participation outside of the workshops. Through this group the *arpilleristas* “would collectively sing and compose songs about their lives as women alone,” also incorporating the dancing of *la cueca sola* (Agosín 33). The *cueca* is a traditional Chilean partner dance about “a couple’s love” and the “different stages of a romantic interlude” (Agosín 33). In *la cueca sola* the woman performs this dance alone, emphasizing the absence of her partner, and transforming it into a “dance of loneliness and lost love” (See Fig. 7) (Agosín 34). Agosín explains,

*La cueca sola* has become an important metaphor for Chilean women confronting repression and human rights violations. The dance represents a denunciation of a society that makes the bodies of victims of political violence disappear, denying them a proper burial and silencing their mourners. Through *la cueca sola*, the dancers tell a story with their solitary feet, the story of the mutilated body of a loved one. (33)

In this way, the *arpilleristas* incorporated song, dance, and public performances into their storytelling efforts, expanding their available vocabularies to include both music and movement, and thus amplifying their potential audience inside of Chile. In the chorus of one of the *cuecas* the women sing:

I demand the truth.  
 I will search heaven and earth  
 without tiring of my search,  
 and I will give my whole life,  
 and I will give my whole life  
 to know where they are. (Agosin 35).

The folk group and its use of song and dance is a powerful demonstration that, just as these women will continue their endless search for the bodies of their loved ones, they will also eternally pursue new ways to tell their stories and speak out against the unacknowledged and unpunished crimes of the military junta.



**Fig. 8** An *arpillera* symbolizing hope for peace in the new democracy (Agosin 85).

Another larger impact of the *arpillera* workshops that I would like to call attention to is the way in which they naturally prepared the participants for the future –the post-authoritarian, post-transitional democratic Chile. In her essay, “Chilean Women’s Resistance in the *Arpillera*

Movement,” Kristen Walker calls the *arpillera* workshops a “democratic model of society.”

While some of the women held “administrative positions” and there was a “division of labor” established, “the workshops were very egalitarian,” as “wages were distributed equally among the members..., and workshops made decisions collectively” (Walker). As one *arpillerista* described it, ““There are no class differences here. We are a real family”” (Walker). Furthermore, in Agosín personal observations of the workshops, she “never saw any kind of hierarchical system. There were no monitors or directors who gave instructions. The group chose the themes to work on and made all other decisions” (18). In this way, it can be said that the manner in which the *arpillera* workshops were run resembled a democracy –the type of government Chile aspired to establish –and therefore afforded the women valuable experiences in living and working within this type of system, beginning under authoritarianism. The political activities of the *arpilleristas* that stemmed from these workshops can also be seen as encompassing useful skills and ideologies for life in the future democracy, a system in which citizens are expected to participate and speak out with their opinions. In addition these more direct connections between the workshops and democracy, the *arpillera* workshops also gave the women a sense of hope for the future, an attitude essential for their individual wellbeing as well as their desire to be a part of a new Chilean society. As one of the women expresses, ““in every one of my *arpilleras* I have spoken of pain but also of hope”” (See Fig. 8) (Agosín 17). Thus, *arpilleras* are not just about memories of the past, they look forward as well.

## Conclusions

Through their delicate and vibrant tapestries, the *arpilleristas* of Chile united to break through a dense silence initiated during the dark era of Pinochet’s rule and that continued to suffocate the country for years after his fall from power. The familiar form of the cloth tapestry

and the possibilities of a visual language make the *arpilleras* an ideal mode of storytelling for the women, which they turned to in order to heal, communicate, and protest in several ways. To denounce repression, disappearance, and torture and to combat a forgetful future, these women told and continue to tell stories, fueled by their personal experiences and the significant events in the life of their nation. By coming together in workshops, the *arpilleristas* were able to accomplish even more than this powerful storytelling through their *arpilleras*. They took to the streets and became active participants in a variety of other forms of protest, they formed a folk group to sing and dance publically about those same experiences that were sewn into the *arpilleras*, and they learned what it would be like to live in a democracy, dreaming hopefully of a better future while processing personal and national tragedies. For each of these reasons, Chile's *arpilleras* offer a unique and fascinating case study of the power of storytelling through the arts, illustrating the vast possibilities that such a collective artistic movement creates.

**CHAPTER 5:  
CONFRONTING THE SILENCE AND FORMING A COLLECTIVE MEMORY IN  
GUATEMALA: An Analysis of Daniel Hernández-Salazar's Angels**

*“Working as an artist, I want my work to call public attention to what has happened, so that it can never happen again” – Daniel Hernández-Salazar*

Despite the important work of CEH and other officially-administered transitional justice efforts, a culture of silence and *impunidad* (impunity) –cultivated from the top-down –persisted in post-civil war Guatemala. “The vast majority of those who committed atrocities not only remain[ed] at large, but often live[d] in close proximity to their victims” (Hoelscher 201). “Thus, despite nearly half a century of civil war and violence, and the ostensible transition to democratic rule following the peace accords, power and social relations in Guatemala remain[ed] largely unchanged” (Hoelscher 201). Clearly, this environment was not only disheartening, but also potentially risky for survivors looking to speak out about the horrific experiences they had endured and hoping to see perpetrators held accountable for the abuses they committed. Recognizing the potentially destructive effects of this context of silence and overall neglect to acknowledge the legacy of the decades of conflict and violence, photographer Daniel Hernández-Salazar began to document and then more creatively respond to the human rights abuses committed and suffered in Guatemala.

Hernández-Salazar grew up in Guatemala City, largely unaffected by his country's civil war violently “raging” around him (Gonzalez). He recalls “friends... warn[ing] him not to wander into the countryside because of the violence,” adding that “no one really talked about what –or who –was behind the killings and disappearances” (Gonzales). Reflecting back on this time he stated, “I was so ignorant of all that had happened... There was such a great disinformation campaign” (Gonzales). His experience is typical of many urban Guatemalans, neither targeted by nor fully aware of the levels of violence and abuse that were taking place

clandestinely and mainly in the rural areas. It makes sense then that Hernández-Salazar began his photographic career rather apolitically as a news photographer (Gonzalez). It was not long though before he came to the realization that he needed to “devote his talents to the politically motivated violence” that he had been awoken to through his professional experiences and eventual branching off into his own personal projects (Gonzalez).

Making a small leap forward in time to July of 1997, Hernandez-Salazar had become fully immersed in his work “as a photojournalist covering the effects of civil war on his country” and was working with the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation (FAFG), “document[ing] exhumations of clandestine graves as well as ceremonial burials” (Hoelscher 207). It was at this time that he devised the idea of “the angel of memory” –the core image and concept behind the photographic projects I examine in this chapter –and became inspired to move beyond his efforts in documentary photography and towards the creation of more artistic and less conventional photographic images in order to react to his county’s violent past and challenge the silence enshrouding its legacy in a way that would prompt others to engage in this essential process of storytelling as well. In the following sections, I will explore the specific projects executed by Hernández-Salazar in connection with his angel of memory through the lens of storytelling. What story do these images tell? How exactly do they tell it? Is it a personal story, the story of a nation, or both?

### ***ESCLARECIMIENTO AND PARA QUE TODOS LO SEPAN***

#### **Background: The Creation and Uses of the Angels**

That above-referenced moment of inspiration, in July of 1997, came when Hernández-Salazar documented the FAFG’s exhumation of “the remains of nine peasants, who were known to have been murdered by the Guatemalan army” (Hoelscher 207). As they were working, “one

of the forensic anthropologists showed Hernández-Salazar a... set of shoulder blades from that mass grave that resembled nothing less than the wings of an angel” (Hoelscher 207). Struck by the power of this likeness, “he photographed the scapula bones... and, after enlarging them dramatically, printed them against another image of a young mestizo man. The resulting image became an angel –or, rather, a series... of angels” (Hoelscher 208). Originally, he created three angels, “each enacting the familiar proverb, ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,’” or “*no veo, no oigo, me callo*” in Spanish (Hoelscher 208-9). This set of images symbolized “the self-imposed blindness, deafness, and silence of the Guatemalan people to the murder of thousands of ‘enemies’ of the Guatemalan military during the... war” (Barry).



**Fig. 9** *Para que todos lo sepan (So That All Shall Know)*. Photographic print through high-contrast negative. 1998. Daniel Hernández-Salazar



**Fig. 10** *Esclarecimiento (Clarification)*. Photographic print on fiber-based paper. 1998. Daniel Hernández-Salazar

These visually striking and deeply meaningful images eventually came to the attention of Bishop Juan Gerardi, the head of the REMHI project, who was working on the group’s final report, *Guatemala: Nunca más (Guatemala: Never Again)*. Bishop Gerardi and his team decided to commission a fourth angel “who speaks,” or, rather, “shouts what happened” (Gonzalez). In



response to this request, Hernández-Salazar created the image, *Para que todos lo sepan* (*So That All Shall Know*) (See Fig. 9). “This is the angel that defiantly and abruptly changes the direction of the previous three who refuse to see, hear, or speak about the past; still bearing the weight of the dead on his back, this angel screams memory” (Hoelscher 209). This polytych incorporating all four angels forms the work, *Esclarecimiento* (*Clarification*) (See Fig. 10). Able to stand both on their own as individual images and also united as a group, the REMHI team deployed the four angels as the covers of each of the four volumes of its report. In an interview, Hernández-Salazar explains the way in which his images were paired with the volumes of *Nunca más*:

The first book is about the effects of violence (cover image: angel covering his eyes); the second book (cover image: angel covering his mouth) describes the structure of the repressive forces and the torture techniques that were used; the third book (cover image: angel covering his ears) discusses the historic events that provoked the war; and the fourth book (cover image: angel with his mouth open, speaking) contains the names of more than 20,000 victims who died during the war. (Barry)

Guatemalan activist and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Rigoberta Menchú Tum describes the angels as “a visual and aesthetic synthesis” of the report (x). But the angels had more work to do beyond gracing the covers of this project in historical memory.



**Fig. 11** *The March of Silence, Guatemala City, 28 April 1998.* Photograph by Daniel Hernández-Salazar

Just two days after the *Nunca más* report was presented to the public, Bishop Gerardi was brutally assassinated (Lovell 7). On the evening of April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1998 “blows to the head from a concrete slab brought about his death” (Lovell 7). Although “nothing have been proved, ...the Catholic Church, human rights groups, and many people believe he was killed because of the report” (Barry). The Bishop’s murder was a tragedy as well as a reminder of the dangerous climate that still existed within Guatemala, well after the civil war ended. In the aftermath of this event, Guatemalans adopted Hernández-Salazar’s angels as a symbol to represent their outrage and to accompany their efforts to denounce what had happened (See Fig. 11). During the 28 April 1998 protest march, “workers, farmhands, artists, intellectuals, human rights workers, indigenous people and Ladinos” took to the streets carrying “posters bearing the words, *Guatemala: Nunca Más*, and the four-part photographic collage that graced the REMHI report’s cover” (Hoelscher 204). W. George Lovell, contributing author to a collection of essays on the work of Hernández-Salazar, recalls the day of Bishop Gerardi’s memorial service and seeing the angels during the solemn march to the church. He describes, “Daniel’s angels [stood] on iconic guard, held aloft among placards that declare[d], ‘Death to Impunity,’ ‘No More Unjust Bloodshed,’ and ‘Monseñor Gerardi: Martyr of the Truth’” (Lovell 7). The angels also appeared during the service, as a copy of each book of *Nunca más* was ceremoniously placed on the altar,

“next to the photograph of Gerardi,” left to “look out from those four volumes and survey the scene” (Lovell 7). Their use by REMHI as well as by the protestors of the death of Bishop Gerardi represent just one chapter in the story of Hernández-Salazar’s angels, but already it is evident that as a concept and a visual symbol the *Angel Series* is both powerful and versatile. Before exploring the further ways in which the angels of memory forced Guatemalans to remember the violent past, a deeper analysis of the images themselves is warranted.

### **The Power of the Photographic Image: Angels as Evidence and Testimony**

But how did Hernández-Salazar create his angels of memory? And why was this manner of storytelling particularly effective? Of course, the images’ most marked possibility lies in their visual impact: they are photographs, or at least based in photography. “No... media is more associated with memory than the camera image, especially the photograph... Indeed, so effectively do photographs aid in the recall of events and things that they have become the primary markers of memory itself” (Hoelscher 198). Photographic images are not only memorable, but they are also accessible to a wide audience; that is, photographs “create a mnemonic frame -...freez[ing] a moment in time for viewing-” in a way that is “meaningful for an entire group” (Hoelscher 198). Furthermore, one need not possess any specific skill set honed by elitist societal structures (e.g. literacy) in order to engage in photography; one can simply look and learn. Steven Hoelscher, who has written several articles on Hernández-Salazar’s angels, provides a particularly effective explanation of the power of the photographic image. He states,

The power of photographs comes from uniting two seemingly contradictory features: they can be used for both evidence (where they acquire truth-value) and for personal testimony (where they acquire symbolic-value). For many people, ‘seeing is believing’ and photographs usually provide the best evidence that

something really happened; they appear to be a record of the real. Yet photographs necessarily have a point of view; they interpret reality as much as they show it. (Hoelscher 198)

Thus, by working in the medium of photography, Hernández-Salazar is able to deploy his angels as both credible pieces of evidence –allowing the viewer to *see* the atrocities committed in his country –as well as the vehicle for his personal reactions to the situation.

The evidentiary- or truth-value of *Esclarecimiento* is further amplified by the fact that the wings of the angel are constructed from a photograph of the bones of an actual victim of the state violence. “It’s very important that the bones in the photographs are real bones of real victims... It’s impossible, then, to deny what happened,” explains Hoelscher (208). In including these bones, Hernández-Salazar grounds his images in the harsh reality of his country’s recent history of brutal genocide and its grave consequences by focusing on the physical remains of those most affected. The bones play another crucial role beyond offering irrefutable proof of death; their presence also asserts the importance of those targeted, marginalized, and abused by the state. By carefully considering the image in this way, it becomes clear “that restoring dignity to people whom circumstances have marginalized and forgotten is a primordial concern that drives Daniel’s work” (Maldonado 1). Through his professional experiences, he had seen first-hand that the “pain” suffered during and as a direct result of the many years of civil war in his country “[was] not anonymous: it always ha[d] a face and a name” (Maldonado 1). He shares this realization with his fellow Guatemalans through his angels, who bear on their shoulders the remains of a real human victim, as they remind them that these terrible events really did transpire and that the victims ought to be remembered and honored.

Although Hernández-Salazar's angels loosely represent works of photography, it is important to recognize, however, that these images were not created in the traditional, straight photography style. Therefore, they are not entirely documentary in nature. This is in large part of the symbolic value of *Esclarecimiento*, its role as the vessel of personal testimony and deeper meaning that goes beyond simply proving that an event took place. In straight photography, the photographer does not alter the image made by the camera; the ultimate print is exactly what was seen through the viewfinder at the moment of releasing the shutter. The images that Hernández-Salazar created for his angel series clearly represent something very different from this. They incorporate multiple photographic images, which he manipulated (enlarged, cropped, etc.) and superimposed to form one composition. This technique is referred to as the *photomontage*.

Hernández-Salazar began his career employing the more traditional style; however working "as a photojournalist covering the traumatic effects of civil war in his country, ... [he grew] increasingly dissatisfied with the limitations of straight documentary photography" (Hoelscher 207-8). Struggling to tell a more profound story with his photographs, he abandoned the more rigid style, concluding that "traditional straight photography failed in its burden to represent the unrepresentable," a major deficit when working "in a context of unimaginable horror" (Hoelscher 208). For Hernández-Salazar, photomontage provided a much more appropriate medium for storytelling about Guatemala's traumatic past and difficult present.

One particularly important characteristic of these collaged images is their fragmentation. Like piecing together memories to form a coherent narrative, the angels combine multiple memorable snapshots separated by obvious "fractures and seams" in order to communicate their story of what has happened (Hoelscher 208). In this way, "Hernández-Salazar's memory work 'resists closure, sustains uncertainty, and allows us to live without full understanding'"

(Hoelscher 208). In other words, this fragmentation suggests that the angels tell just one version of the story –rather than The Story –leaving room for and encouraging a dialogue amongst all who witnessed and/or were affected in some way by the violence that Hernández-Salazar seeks to represent. Thus, the angels should not be viewed as only a singular story in and of themselves; rather they simultaneously exist as a powerful catalyst or invitation for a wider storytelling process.

### ***STREET ANGEL***

#### **A New Project for the Angels**

As was mentioned previously, *Para que todos lo sepan* and *Esclarecimiento* were not Hernández-Salazar's only projects incorporating his angels of memory. Emboldened by the success of these original pieces, the artist contemplated further means of participation in the effort to establish a historical memory of Guatemala's horrific civil war (Hoelscher 210). He particularly wanted to find "an evocative way to 'remind people that the crime against the Bishop had not been acknowledged, just as those against so many other people had not'" (Hoelscher 210). The result, a project called *Street Angel*, culminated in a series of publicly displayed reproductions of *Para que todos lo sepan* installed throughout Guatemala City in April of 1999 to commemorate the first anniversary of the assassination of Bishop Gerardi (See Fig. 12 and 13). Miguel Flores Castellanos explains Hernández-Salazar's process for creating the reproductions employed in this public arts initiative:

Daniel developed a simple and efficient technique: a 'matrix' of black dots was placed over an acetate plate, in which various grays emerged by the dispersion or concentration of dots, a fundamental principal in graphic arts. The work was then fragmented into sixty photographic sheets, each 8 by 10 inches, thereby allowing

the poster to be readily and accurately reproduced through photocopying. The act of deconstructing the work protected the anonymity of the image until the moment of assembly. (25)

Armed with the fragments that would soon form the recognizable composition of Hernández-Salazar's shouting angel, he and thirty-five friends split into "five teams of seven people [that] each moved silently through the night" assembling the installations "in locations known to be associated with the perpetrators of mass violence," such as military intelligence factories (See Fig. 13), army headquarters, and a former military school, as well as sites of "high symbolic value for Guatemalan society," for example San Sebastián Church where Bishop Gerardi was assassinated (See Fig. 12) (Hoelscher 210). Each installation took "no more than 10 minutes to complete" (Hoelscher 212). Hernández-Salazar describes their technique as "guerrilla art" –an "artistic intervention" "installed without the notification or permission from official sources of authority" (Hoelscher 211). Thus, the next morning, all of Guatemala City awoke to the powerful surprise of the various 6½ by 5 foot reproductions of *Para que todos lo sepan* screaming its message of memory, justice, and truth (Hoelscher 210).



**Fig. 12** Street Angel Installation in front of San Sebastian Church, the parish where Juan Gerardi was assassinated, Guatemala City. April 1999. Photograph by Daniel Hernández-Salazar

Although working in this clandestine manner “posed real risks in Guatemala, where actions considered subversive were met frequently with violence,” Hernández-Salazar felt a strong sense of responsibility, as an artist, to tell his story, and in doing so attempted to prompt others to do the same. Fortunately, no harm was brought upon him or his team that night or in the aftermath of the installation. In fact, reactions to the project varied from site to site. Hoelscher explains this array of responses and outcomes in his essay, “Angels of Memory: Photography and Haunting in Guatemala City;” these ranged from immediate dismantling at The Banco Industrial to a delayed tearing down by the Guatemalan military who did not understand the meaning of the installation “for the better part of a week” to sites where the image “was actively nurtured and lasted for months” or even years (212). Hernández-Salazar himself observed that, quite ironically, “many of the installations were made to disappear by the same people responsible for the disappearance of thousands of Guatemalan citizens during the war years” (Hoelscher 212). Judging from these reactions, it is obvious that the *Street Angel* series had a great impact, able to give hope to some, point a finger at others, and remind all of the unfinished business left by recent history.





**Fig. 13** Street Angel Installation facing the military intelligence facilities, Guatemala City. April 1999. Photograph by Daniel Hernández-Salazar



**Fig. 14** Street Angel Installation in Buenos Aires, Argentina. May 2001. Photograph by Daniel Hernández-Salazar

It is interesting to note that these important impacts of the *Street Angel* project were not limited to Guatemala alone. “Recognizing the complex flows of shared history, politics, and economy between distant places, Daniel Hernández-Salazar... expanded his place-specific public art to other localities” around the world, including Argentina, Japan, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and more (Hoelscher 213). In Argentina, for example, he created an installation at the Buenos Aires headquarters of the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*<sup>11</sup> in recognition of the connection between the two countries’ “struggles with bearing witness to government-sponsored atrocity” (See Fig. 14) (Hoelscher 213). Their ability to derive meaning from such a variety of locations and distinct historical contexts demonstrates that, no matter how far from Guatemala the angels

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<sup>11</sup> *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* is a human rights organization led by mothers of the detained-disappeared of Argentina’s Dirty War.

travel, the “photography and urban space mingle to produce effects that are striking, haunting, and memorable” (Hoelscher 213).

### **Storytelling through Public Installations**

Using photography and more specifically the technique of photomontage, Hernández-Salazar was able to create works of art with both truth- and symbolic-value. This mode of storytelling propels the *Angel Series* into the realm of the credible, a piece of evidence proving what had happened, as well as the personal, offering a more subjective testimony or message. Turning now to a consideration of the *Street Angel* project, it is crucial to ask, how did adapting the image of *Para que todos lo sepan* into a series of public installations add to the storytelling abilities of the angels of memory? One effect of displaying the shouting angel around the city is that the piece was able to derive additional meaning from the sites it occupied. As I mentioned in the description of the project, *Street Angel* was a site-specific work, meaning that the location for each angel was carefully chosen and meant to be part of the reading of the piece. For example, by choosing sites associated with the perpetrators of mass violence, Hernández-Salazar strengthened his message of the need for accountability, directly using these pieces to challenge impunity. Victoria Sanford explains, “the work of Hernández-Salazar places the memory of the dead in public spaces and forces an engagement with those responsible for the deaths” (326). Thus, the project serves to “remind the torturers that though they live with impunity, their crimes are not forgotten” (Sanford 329). In a state that generally failed to hold perpetrators accountable in any official and/or legal sense, it was essential that unofficial mechanisms—in this case the angels of memory—rose to meet the need for justice. Although defiant artistic installations may appear to be a weak alternative to the conviction and sentencing of a Guatemalan military officer guilty of torture, it is important to underscore that “Hernández-Salazar’s work, in the very best of

artistic traditions, defies those in power by challenging their official history and their domination over public spaces by placing the space under the gaze of the angel” (Sanford 331). In this way, by choosing to adapt *Para que todos lo sepan* into an installation series, Hernández-Salazar was able to emphasize the accountability-focused aspect of his story of the violence he witnessed as well as to actively promote the social change that is at the core of his message.

Perpetrators and those in power were merely one segment of a much broader audience that Hernández-Salazar targeted with *Street Angel*. As the above images of the series convey, the angels were erected in very public places, where people would naturally encounter them as they went about their daily lives (See Fig. 12 and 13). This extreme physical accessibility meant that Hernández-Salazar’s audience consisted of all of Guatemala City. In addition, this image was both simple and already familiar to many Guatemalans because of its connections to REMHI, which made the piece accessible in the conceptual sense as well. Thus, the form of the installation served to widen the potential audience of the piece by physically bringing the art to the people. Once embedded within these public spaces, the angels became unavoidable, directly confronting their viewers and shouting their plea of not just accountability but of remembrance as well (Castellanos 26). Castellanos explains the angels’ ability to engage the viewer in the type of dialogue necessary for the promotion of this additional message, or goal, of memory formation (both individual and collective); he writes,

When the angel suddenly appears, the observer has to deal with the emotions conjured up when remembering a historic or current event, whether in one’s country or in one’s personal life. In other words, Hernández-Salazar presented an encounter with the angel in such a way as to persuade the observer to think of the

past but immediately evaluate the events and circumstances of the present, using the observer's own memory and conscience. (26)

It was certainly the hope of Hernández-Salazar to initiate interaction not only between angel and observer but also amongst observers, themselves, so that they could share their reactions to the installations and participate in the larger project of forming an evolving national collective memory of the past violence. Although the memories evoked by the angels were no doubt painful for many, it was and continues to be absolutely necessary to confront them “if Guatemala city is finally to dismantle the mechanisms that made the violence possible” (Hoelscher 214). Thus, we see once again how essential it is to tell stories in the wake of mass atrocities, and, in this case, how the installation is a particularly apt vehicle for establishing and perpetuating the process.

### CONCLUSIONS

Through his iconic angels of memory, Daniel Hernández-Salazar told the story of the violence, forgetfulness, and injustice that he witnessed in his country, and creatively prompted his fellow Guatemalans to join him in confronting the past, breaking the silence, and forming a collective memory of the decades of civil war, abuse, and genocide that will forever stain the history of their nation. His works *Esclarecimiento*, *Para que todos lo sepan*, and *Street Angel* serve as important examples of how photography, particularly the nontraditional photomontage and public installations, can become the vehicle for unofficial, alternative storytelling efforts during the period of transitional justice. Hernández-Salazar's work demonstrates how, by using photography, an individual is able to construct a story with both truth- and symbolic-value, establishing evidence of the events it recalls while still offering a personal point of view. This is particularly important when working in the context of denial and resistance to remembering the

past and attempting to communicate unimaginably horrific truths, as was certainly the case in Guatemala and in most other states that transition out of periods of mass violence and government repression. Combining photography with the technique of the installation, and thereby inserting the art into public spaces, increases accessibility and even forces engagement with the work, which can potentially lead to the confrontation of issues through important dialogue. In this way, public installations appear to be a particularly effective means of storytelling, especially within a project of transitional justice, as they can catalyze a larger process beyond themselves.

## CH 6: CONCLUSION

*“Story is the way we remember, the way we make judgments... By means of story, we can experience the terrible and noble dimensions of what happened, we can put names to faces, meaning to places and events, gain a sense of humanity of the victims and the victimizers, relive the events of history in their fearsome detail.” – Harold Scheub<sup>12</sup>*

In the wake of a period of massive collective and personal trauma such as Argentina’s Dirty War, Pinochet’s repressive rule in Chile, or the civil war and genocide of Guatemala, “remembering and telling the truth about” the abuses of the past “are prerequisites for” moving the country forward in a way that addresses the dual aim of any transitional justice project: to restore the social order and to facilitate the healing of individual victims (Hayner 135). In this essay, I defined this key transitional process as storytelling, or re-storytelling, providing an interdisciplinary examination of its functions in the post-authoritarian context and identifying truth commissions and the arts as venues for its practice. Drawing from a variety of texts – philosophical, psychological, political, and more –it becomes apparent that storytelling has the potential, at least theoretically, to play a number of important roles during a transition to democracy.

Storytelling, in its many forms, is a means of asserting and safeguarding the principle of “never again,” condemning the abuses of the past and looking toward preventing similar atrocities in the future through memory. Furthermore, this process can break through the silence and misinformation imposed by the past regime to create a corrected version of personal and national histories based on a dynamic and dialogical truth. Storytelling is also an effective healing modality for individual victims of trauma, as well as a step towards achieving justice in a restorative sense, rebalancing the power dynamic between victim and perpetrator. And finally,

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<sup>12</sup> *The Art of Truth-telling about Authoritarian Rule* (10)

telling stories –both individual and collective –is a way to rebuild a shattered community and begin to model the values of the new democratic state. It is important to remember though that storytelling is not a panacea. It is not without its risks and flaws, nor do I mean to suggest that it alone can address all of the issues faced by a state in transition. This process has however proven to be a central piece of larger transitional justice projects as evidenced by the truth commissions and artistic production of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala.

Of the two storytelling spaces that I discuss, the truth commission is clearly the more conventional and widely recognized as a mechanism of democratic transition. These bodies represent an officially-administered (government created or approved) storytelling effort. Because of its connection to the state, the establishment of a truth commission signifies to victims that, unlike the old repressive regime, the new democratic government cares about them and their stories. This establishes trusting relationships between citizen and state, while also imparting upon the former group the sense of power and agency needed to fully participate both in the process of testifying and in the new democracy. Victims can also gain a sense of relief and purpose by participating in a truth commission, as each of these bodies is charged with the creation and publication of a report that will serve as a permanent record of the truths it uncovers. Finally, truth commissions are a means of holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes, contributing to retributive justice efforts (as in the case of Argentina's CONADEP) or resulting in less formal social consequences.

Despite these positive features of these bodies as storytelling venues, they also have several limitations. Generally, as was the case in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, these bodies have not held public hearings, restricting their impact for both victims and the rest of society. In addition, truth commissions are not an ideal space for individual healing, nor do they claim to be.

Their aim is not therapy, thus interviewers may not be sufficiently trained to deal with trauma and their model of one-time catharsis has in some instances caused more harm than healing for testifiers. The mandate of a truth commission also limits its effectiveness as a storytelling space, as certain periods of time, types of crimes, locations, etc. must be focused on (recall the example of Chile). These limitations do not render the truth commission a useless model; rather they suggest that it ought to be thought of as just one piece or step in a larger storytelling process, which happens via several mechanisms during periods of transition.

In the cases of Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala, additional and alternative storytelling efforts took place through the arts. While it is problematic to label the arts as a mechanism of transitional justice in an official sense—that is, alongside officially-administered processes such as truth commissions, trials, reparations programs, etc.—what happened in these three Latin American countries certainly suggests that this grassroots mode of storytelling ought to be recognized as sharing comparable importance. Generally speaking, the arts represent an alternative vocabulary—or perhaps a set of alternative vocabularies, as the field includes music, theatre, visual arts, and more—that survivors of trauma often find to be more appropriate and/or authentic for describing the unimaginable suffering they have endured. Though one cannot be sure as to who exactly will see, read, or otherwise encounter his or her artistically-constructed story, there is certainly the potential for it to be shared publicly and therefore to reach a wider audience than a testimony shared in a closed truth commission interview. These characteristics of the arts—the variety of form and ability to be shared publicly—along with other considerations, such as when a story is told and by whom, illustrate that this venue of storytelling derives much of its value from being open and inclusive. In addition, many artistic forms (though not all) are themselves a tangible historical record of the events they



represent. While we see this same quality in the truth commission report, in many cases a work of art is more accessible and/or engaging for a wider audience than is a lengthy scholarly publication. Thus, in many ways, the arts are an excellent complement to the work of a truth commission in terms of storytelling.

To further explore and more clearly demonstrate the potential uses of art as means of storytelling within transitional justice efforts, specific works can be analyzed and linked to the theoretical concepts I have put forward about both the importance of storytelling in general and the arts more specifically. Countless effective and interesting examples exist within the Argentine, Chilean, and Guatemalan contexts; but for the purposes of this essay, I chose just one from each country. Turning first to the Argentina, Nora Strejilevich's *A Single, Numberless Death* offers evidence of my claim that an artistic form, in this case *testimonio*, is needed to authentically represent traumatic experiences for many survivors. In this case, Strejilevich is able to tell a personal yet collective story about her country's Dirty War and its aftermath that is both engaging and credible because of her careful assembly of the book's structure and content in a manner that mirrors the process of remembering a traumatic event and that includes a variety of voices and sources. In this way, Strejilevich uses art to formulate a valuable counter-narrative that stands as a record in opposition to the false master narrative imposed during the years of repression and perpetuated by an ongoing climate of silence and fear in the country. In Chile, the *arpillera* movement serves to display storytelling as a means empowerment for the victim. Through the approachable medium of the *arpillera*, a group of women found not only a way to survive and heal from their suffering, but also a vehicle for protest. This movement had dramatic ripple effects, inspiring the women to use their newfound agency to be politically active in other ways (demonstrations, the folk group, etc.), thus preparing them for participation in the new

democracy. Finally, the work of Daniel Hernández-Salazar in Guatemala demonstrates that artistic works, particularly photography, can serve an important dual purpose within the storytelling process: providing convincing evidence of the abuses of the past while still conveying a personal reaction or testimony. His extension of his original pieces into the installations of the *Street Angel* project is an example of how art can utilize public spaces to connect with an audience and to force a confrontation with difficult issues. By moving to the streets, the angels also played a role in holding perpetrators accountable, at least in a social sense, for the crimes of the past.

Each of these case studies relates back to and provides evidence in support of the theoretical foundations upon which this essay is constructed –evaluations of storytelling (through the venues of truth commissions and the arts) as a necessary process within transitional justice efforts. It is my hope that the evidence I have presented here will add to the field of transitional justice by offering and beginning to justify an unconventional consideration: elevating our regard for the arts, and other unofficial grassroots storytelling processes, to the same level of legitimacy and importance as the traditional officially-administered mechanisms. An analysis of the transitions to democracy after periods of mass-scale trauma in Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala demonstrates that the arts can and indeed have played a key role –comparable to yet distinct from that of truth commissions or criminal prosecutions –in individual and collective efforts to remember and reckon with human rights abuse. At the very least, this certainly suggests that there is quite an array of options that ought to be considered in the future construction of holistic and effective transitional justice projects.

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